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—o—

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THE Veldt Dwellers

BY
F. BANCROFT

Author of
"Of Like Passions."

THIRD EDITION

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TO THE HOMELAND

. . .

For as from void, blind-eyed and consciousness,
We struck the spaces of thine age-old plains,
Across thy bare brown bosom steeped in light,
Beneath thy blue-domed bergs, thy glittering Cross
—O Magic Mother, cradle of our youth!
O Mother Land, our earliest, dearest love!—
Even as we groped, blind forces on thy skirts,
Toward the low-fringed shores of the To Be,
Toward the light and warmth of Primal Day,
Time touched us, and we Were,



GLOSSARY

Almachtig !—Almighty!
Biltong—Dried meat.
Broertje—Little brother (term of endearment).
Donga—Hollow.
Dop—Cape brandy.
Dorp—Little village.
Duivels—Devils.
Engelsch or *Engelschman*—English or Englishman.
Heer !—Lord !
Ja—Yes.
Jonge—A youth.
Kapetein—Captain.
Kappie—Sun-bonnet.
Kerel—A young fellow.
Kerk—Church.
Komfyt—Preserved fruit.
Kopje—Hillock.
Krantz (s.) *Krantze* (p.)—Precipice—s.
Maar—But.
Meisje—A young girl.
Mooi—Nice, pretty.
Neef—Nephew.
Ni—No.
Nooit—Never.
Onze land—Our land.
Oprecht—Upright.

Opzit—lit. Courting (or term signifying).
Poppje—Doll.
Predikant—Pastor.
Roer—Gun.
Rooinek—Britisher.
Scheit—Shoot.
Schelm—Rascal.
Schepsel—Creature.
Schimmel—Grey horse.
Schoen-son—Son-in-law.
School-meester—School-master.
Sjambok—Leather thong.
Slechte—Bad
Souppje—A drink.
Sukkel—To work hard for.
Taal—Cape-Dutch.
Toch !—Exclamation.
Veldtschoen—Shoes of raw hide.
Verdoemd !—Damned.
Vierkleur vlag—lit. Flag of four colours. Term signifying flag of the Dutch nation.
Wilde-kat—Wild cat.
Wonnerlyk—Wonderful.
Zit-kamer—Sitting-room.

THE VELDT DWELLERS

PROLOGUE

I

STEEPED in the white light of a tropical sunshine and facing the red-bricked front of The Outspan—part farmhouse, part hostel, part country-store—with its single row of outhouses thrust like giant arms to right and left of the main building, ran the broad trail of the high-road—the sign and seal of an invisible civilization, the link that bound the back-veldt *dorps* and farms of the Northern Transvaal to the life and stir of the great mining centres of the south.

But to the rear of the house lay the garden and orchard merging into the grounds, cultivated and virgin, that stretched to the rush-fringed gully in the *kloof* below through which flowed a mountain-stream backed by a lofty, wooded height towering upward into solitary space. Spanning the stream, a log-bridge of primitive workmanship connected The Outspan with the Top Farm, which lay up the mountain-side, stretching to its boulder-crowned, flat-topped summit, named by the Brandon children World's View.

It was in the garden and orchard, under the grateful coolness of the shady trees, or upon the rush-bordered banks of the stream—shallow, and purling over the bright

round pebbles at one point of its course, but falling some few yards lower around a huge, flat-topped boulder into a fathomless, silent pool—that the life of the family beneath the roof of The Outspan centred. Here from early morn till bedtime the children played, worked, sang, danced, wept, quarrelled, loved, and learned the lessons of life. And it was from the back stoep—where through the trellised woodwork of the verandah great peach-trees thrust their pink-laden branches, and the overpowering perfume of the waxy orange-blossoms mingling with the sweetly-pungent odours of flowering rose-trees and verbenas was wafted insistently on the hot air—that their parents, in those intervals of leisure which came but seldom in their hard-working lives, watched the physical and mental development of their little ones, planned for their future welfare, and dreamed those ambitious parental dreams common to fathers and mothers, all unmindful of the doom which lay upon the land—the oncoming of that murderous civil strife which to so many humble, wayside families, living their lives out on the solitary spaces of the wide veldt-world, was to mean the severance of those closest earthly ties, dividing parent from child, brother from brother, so that a man's foes were to be, indeed, "they of his own household."

* * * *

Under the shade of a group of graceful syringas, a sunny-haired girl, with jewel-bright eyes, watched her two young brothers intent upon their favourite pastime of throwing for *do'ossi*.

Upon their skill as marksmen, the number of *do'ossi*—which to farm children in South Africa represent cattle, *i.e.*, wealth—depended. The fundamental rule of the game was that each marksman should aim at the coveted toy *with closed eyes*. If successful in hitting the *do'ossi* under these somewhat hampering conditions, the treasured ivory-joint became his,

"I'll have to be hired man," George Brandon remarked resignedly, when the pick of this strange herd—the great, polished, yellow *dol'ossi* representing the bull—fell to his younger brother.

"How well you threw to-day, Thane," said his sister, springing upward to catch at a low, broad bough that promised well for an exciting swing.

An echo came to her words.

"The—little—baas—didn't—throw—fair," a fresh young voice was insolently droning a repetition of the charge. "The—little—baas—didn't——"

"Son of a water-rat, hold thy peace! Wouldst bring a storm about our heads?" growled one among the group of native boys, who, from a distance, were permitted to watch their young masters at play. But the bold and impudent Singula continued half below his breath to voice his conviction of an injustice done to the heir of the Brandons:

"The—little—baas—didn't—throw—fair."

"Cease, addle-head! pig! baboon! What is it to thee? Art thou as the white masters, fool?"

"Cease! or we shall be driven from the garden."

In a guilty conscience suspicion is readily awakened. Thane Brandon turned sharply from his cherished *dol'ossi* and surveyed frowningly the now utterly impassive countenances of the native boys. Addressing one in fluent Zulu, he demanded masterfully:

"Zimbene, why hush you Singula?"

"For naught but his foolishness, O little baas," protested Zimbene, as he lay stomach upon earth and warily prodded with outstretched, bare, brown toes the guilty Singula. "The little baas has the cattle and the *mooi* fat bull," proceeded the wily Zimbene; "he will grow rich—rich—and buy many wives, and they shall hoe his lands——"

"Cease, O schemer!" It was George's usually mild, good-natured young voice that now rang out threateningly as he sprang to his feet, his gentle blue eyes all aflame

with righteous indignation on Thane's behalf. "Cease ! that we may hear what sings Singula."

Zimbene's flow of eloquence thus cut short, he paused in his attempts to avert the coming storm, merely administering a furtive kick to the offending Singula as a hint to him to mend his song. Singula, however, determined upon justice, waited only until the irate little boys were upon him before leaping lightly to his feet and bounding, with the agility of the wild-cat, a few yards beyond their reach. In this way he passed through the orchard, drawing them after him, until he lay crouching among the long rank grass above the river-bank, when his droning chant again rang out on the still noonday air : "The—little—baas—didn't—throw—fair !"

George, to whose affectionate heart Thane was very dear, instantly sprang forward, bent on certain capture of the misguided youth. But though he clasped and grasped the wily Singula, the nude, smooth, well-greased body of the tormentor slipped from beneath his clutch ; and with a low, gay chuckle, that was maddening in the extreme, Singula was speeding down the pathway that led to the rush-fringed banks of the stream, followed by the whole party of children in hot pursuit of a common and dangerous foe.

"He must be thrashed till he takes back his wicked lies," George exclaimed, breathlessly. "Wait till I get hold of the beggar—you'll see !"

But Singula had no intention whatever of falling into 'Baas' George's clutches, and not being incommoded by garments he dashed into the stream and now lay panting at full length upon the big, flat-topped boulder that blocked the flow of the waters as they rushed by on either side of its smooth grey sides, to fall immediately below into the dark, still, bottomless pool.

Now, Singula, safe from attack, lay on his back upon the hot, flat rock, kicking his sticks of legs skyward, waving his lean, brown arms in insolent contempt of his helpless but furiously-raging foes, while with idle

insouciance his clear young voice chanted lazily the hateful accusation :

"Eh-hu . . . Eh-hu . . . the—little —baas—didn't—throw—fair."

"Brute! pig! porcupine! I'll smash thy head when I get at thee!" screamed the furious Thane, his steel-grey eyes blazing with fiery indignation and passionate anger as he shook an impotent fist at his traducer.

"Zimbene . . . Zimbene, drive him over to us!" shouted George coaxingly, since threats and commands had failed. Out from between the rushes on the opposite bank Zimbene's woolly head peeped, while across the song of the stream came his reply :

"Little baas, I will put myself under thy heel—but ask me not to touch the water-rat ; for, as thou knowest, his mother is a witch, and would *tor* the house of my father so that all therein should die the death."

"Coward!" George shouted back disdainfully, while Singula's laugh rang out insultingly, inflaming the children to a pitch of madness.

"Let us go back to the garden ; then we shan't hear the little beast," Margery suggested, suddenly recalled to the fact that they were disobeying a most stringent parental command in leaving the shelter of the trees by the feel of the hot sun beating fiercely upon her head. "Come, boys, I'll race you back."

She turned, catching a hand of each young brother, and drew them from the spot.

"If only I hadn't promised mother never to go into the water in the heat," George said regretfully, as he looked at the abused Thane and sighed. But :

"Don't think of it, George," his sister urged warningly ; "father would be terribly angry if ever you went into the water with the sun right overhead ; it would be enough to kill you."

And : "No, George, you mustn't ; you would only get a thrashing for it from father," little Thane added moodily, reading his brother's thoughts.

"But for that brute to get off scot-free," George objected.

"Another time your chance will come," Margery began sensibly.

But, unfortunately, as she spoke came again the hateful drone with startling clearness. Singula, not to be cheated of his fun, had forsaken his rocky bed and now crept closely upon the retreating foe. As they turned, his coal-black eyes peered roguishly at them from among the tall rushes some few yards distant, the low drone filled the air: "didn't—throw—fair——"

George, in an access of overpowering rage, gave chase. Singula, regaining the bank, plunged into the water. But, now, the white boy, heedless of all but his capture and punishment, fell upon him bodily—shaking, thumping, half-choking him—as he struggled desperately to free himself. The churning waters covered both boys in a cloud of spray and foam.

"The water-rat is in the hands of the baas! The water-rat getteth his due!" came a triumphant chorus from the opposite bank.

"Oh! whatever will father say?" Margery demanded desperately of the dancing, jubilant Thane. She herself alternately danced with joy at George's wonderful prowess, and quaked with fear as to the probable consequences of his rash act. She resolved to dry his clothes 'on the quiet,' and so avert all knowledge of the catastrophe.

Next moment she shrieked aloud. Singula, in his struggles, had drawn George after him across the boulder, and with an ominous splash that the still air re-echoed loudly both boys fell headlong into the fathomless pool.

II

THE cries of the children brought to the rescue some field-labourers, headed by Jonas, the native foreman. George, manfully keeping himself afloat, was assisted in his efforts to reach the boulder.

"Where is Singula?" were his first words on finding himself grasped by Jonas's long brown arm.

"It's with his father the devil he'd be if all got their due," growled the trusty old servant; "and I'd like to know, Master George, if you think it is worth your while to risk your life over scum like *him*?"

Jonas' voice and accent expressed the worst possible opinion of the water-rat. His adoration for Master George left him choking with rage at the bare idea of the imminent risk of drowning the boy had run through the instrumentality of so low a thing as the little black imp.

George, with chattering teeth, was hurried homeward. Half-way up the garden the children spied their mother flying hatless towards them, followed by their father.

"George!" shrieked Mrs. Brandon, who had heard a wild rumour that her first-born son had fallen into the pool. Scarcely trusting the evidence of her senses, she now clutched him in her arms, with horror and dread pounding at her wildly-beating heart.

"Oh—mother!" poor George was stricken suddenly by a sense of his failure in duty as a son. How impossible he had found it to reconcile this filial obedience with his conviction of what was due from him as Thane's elder brother he was at a loss to explain, disliking to tell tales

even of the native boy. "It couldn't be helped, mother," he said lamely; "it won't happen again," for never again, he reflected, would Singula be allowed entrance into the garden.

"I'll see it doesn't," roared his father, who had been listening breathlessly to Jonas' account of the accident and of the cause that had led up to it. "To think of you goin' foolin' round that pool—led right into it by that cursed nigger—I'll break every bone in his d——d body. . . I'll skin his d——d eyes!" He was choking with rage. "Go!" he shouted to the smirking Jonas; "bid them be off the place—every man and woman of the lot, with all their d——d brats! I'll not have them on the place another day! I'll burn their huts! . . . I'll throw their traps on the veldt if they're not off the place by sunset! Go, Jonas; give 'em the word to clear, sharp!" Then, as Jonas, excited to intensest admiration by this harsh sentence upon an inoffensive native household, went off in hot haste on his errand Brandon turned furiously upon his son. "Haven't I told you *never* to go near that boulder? Haven't I? I'll make you remember it! Here—let go—let go."

He snatched George from his wife's grasp. She, crying: "Don't touch him! I won't have him touched! It's ridiculous! George has never in his life been disobedient! I won't—*won't*—have him touched," clung to her son.

"Never mind, mother . . . don't cry, mother dear . . . it hurts much worse to see you cry." George's distressed tones were drowned by his father's thwacks and his mother's "don't." But, Margery, black with rage against her father, heard the request, and with gentle force pulled her mother by the sleeve.

"Come in, Mums," she said, impatiently; "you only make George feel worse; and father'll cool down sooner by himself."

Seeing his half-fainting wife drawn away by his daughter, Brandon's arm fell nervelessly to his side. "Good God!" he groaned below his breath, and his

face, too, was grey with the late terrible emotion through which he had just passed.

"Off with those wet togs of yours, my boy," he said aloud; "and look slippy," he shouted after the flying young figure; and surrounded by his mother and sister, together with his old nurse Lisbeth—who had been hinting at the sound scolding in store for "her ole man," the inoffensive Jonas—the culprit, a veritable hero in the eyes of this wayside household who loved him with a rare devotion, was rushed into his bedroom; dried, re-clothed, and comforted with hot spiced-wine and plum-cake.

III

EVENING had fallen upon this most eventful day—a day of days in the annals of the history of The Outspan.

Who so filial and loving a son as the little eight-year-old boy, the hope of the Brandons, whom everyone loved; the one tractable, obedient member of an otherwise unruly family? Margery was wilful—terribly headstrong—terribly hard to manage—so her mother was reminding her still fuming husband as they sat together late that night after the rest of the household had gone to their beds; and Thane, as he very well knew, was frightfully hot-tempered and disobedient and stubborn. What would these two be without the softening influence of George—so steady, so dependable, so honourable and truthful and sweet-natured as he was?

At every “so” Mrs. Brandon paused in her task of mending her boys’ socks to point an accusing spike of a darning at her husband.

“I don’t say he isn’t,” grumbled Brandon, though in distinctly mollified tones. He took up his pipe, knocked out the ash, and proceeded with a sigh of intense relief to light up. “First smoke I’ve had since it happened . . . my heart’s been in my mouth ever since.” He drew in a whiff, then laid down the pipe and shook his head gloomily. “Can’t fancy it even now . . . that ’ull tell you. . . . Good heavens! wife! do you tell yourself in cold blood that our boy was *in* that damned hole?—*actually in it!* How he didn’t sink and drown

and go to the bottomless-bottom—if one may say such a thing—and lie there for evermore, beats me!—Hush, Barbara! for goodness' sake don't go off into hysterics again! Pull yourself together . . . here, drink this; yes, you must; it'll buck you up . . . don't go off again . . . you'll wake the children . . . there, there, dear."

Mrs. Brandon drank, choked, and cried—laying her head on the basket of stockings and bedewing them with her tears.

"Oh, George! George! however could you say it out so cruelly? Haven't I—*Oh . . . haven't I been thinking of nothing else all day?*" she demanded in tones of anguish.

"Hush! hush! steady now, mother . . . don't think of it no more. I was a brute to have said it . . . but you blame me—yes, you do, don't shake your head; I know at bottom of your heart you blame me for laying a finger on him."

"I don't—but he didn't deserve it," she explained confusedly.

"He didn't—yet he did. Don't you see——"

"Yes, I *do* see," she interrupted, lifting her head proudly and again pointing the needle accusingly at him; "I see our boy's wonderful loyalty and nobility of spirit. Think of it, dear, such a little chap, yet so honourable and brave—he felt he must defend Thane at all costs. It was this sense of honour, so strong in him, and his deep, true love for his brother that impelled him to risk your anger—my distress—for he never has been disobedient, not through all his young, sweet life. He loves us too dearly—yet he loves Thane too. . . . Oh, my boy—so tender-hearted, so noble, so dear"—and Mrs. Brandon's head again went down before the awful thought of how nearly she had lost this most gracious boy and precious son, the child nearest to her gentle, loving heart.

Her husband, though cast in a harsher, harder mould—a type reproduced in the wilful, proud-spirited Margery

and the stormy-natured, stubborn little Thane—yet understood something of that profound agony which tore at her heart-strings. He reasoned no further, but, in mingled irritation and contrition, drew the sock at which she had been working from off her hand, threw it—spike and all—among its fellows in the basket, pushed that homely object across the length of the table, and taking his wife in his arms carried her off bodily to bed.

IV

IT had, indeed, been a day of days at The Outspan—the master's pipe out for the day, the mistress in hysterics and a fainting-fit too, as Lisbeth was aware, and now in confidence made the thing known to Jonas.

"And why not?" demanded that worthy, scowling hideously. "Why not, woman? It's not another boy like Master George that the Almighty would be likely sparing to her again in a hurry," added Jonas, in the sepulchral tones that had marked him throughout the past eventful hours.

"Let us pray," said Jonas, who prided himself upon being a "church-boy"—a peg higher in the social scale of the red-blanketed barbarian. "Let us to prayers; and among other blessings for which we have to give thanks this night, let us not forget to express our jubulations that this farm of the highly respectable Mr. Brandon is now clear of the con-*dam*-i-na-ting presence of the family of the ignorant, devil-worshipping water-rats."

V

SLEEP had been long in coming to the youngsters. Margery, the self-reliant, wilful young daughter of the house, stronger temperamentally than her softer-natured mother, felt no longer the sickening pit-a-pat at her heart; felt only a fierce anger towards Singula, a fierce joy that he and his had already been sent packing with a month's wages in lieu of the customary notice (Brandon, though hard, was a just man). The little girl felt, too, a fierce conviction that, had George been drowned, she would have thrown her own young body into the pool to fall into corruption by his side. Her love for her brother was the intense, unreasoning idolatry of child-worship. Headstrong, wilful, perverse, and oft-times secretive and disobedient, she was influenced only by the passionate love she felt for her brother. Margery closed her eyes again and again, but as often re-opened them to consider the delicious sensation of George's safety. But, in the end, she could bear the loneliness no longer and crept from her room when all was quiet to snuggle on the foot of the bed in the adjacent nursery, where her brothers slept, and verify by touch that George was safely there.

That hero, slumbering lightly in the earlier hours of the evening, had been awakened by the sound of a stifled sob. He listened wonderingly. Who could it be? Not Thane, the callous, stony-hearted young rascal whose proud boast it was that nothing and no one could wring a tear from his steel-bright eyes. "*Girls cried,*"

so he would scornfully tell his sister and their little neighbours the du Bruyn girls, who lived across the stream and spent most of their time with the children at The Outspan. Thane was the despair of parents, nurses and friends. Violent, hot-tempered, hard of heart, he was constantly in mischief, and as constantly refused to acknowledge his misdeeds. Here, again, it was George who alone could exert the slightest influence, for Thane secretly worshipped his elder brother with a passionate, stormy, heart-searing worship that softened his iron nature to an occasional fit of repentance and amendment of his ways.

"Thane . . . old chap . . ." George said, softly.

The sobbing continued.

"Look here, old man, you mustn't. . . . Is it a bad dream?"

"I haven't dreamed nothin'," sobbed six-year-old Thane. "I couldn't dream nothin', 'cause I couldn't sleep thinkin' of you in that nasty ole pool."

"But I got out all right. Old Jonas pulled me out splendidly; and father's going to give him a *mooi* fat heifer, and he says we must never, *never* send him away. He's to live on The Outspan always."

"But father thrashed you—the beast!"

"Hush, Thane! you mustn't say that of Dad; his whacks didn't hurt—not so very much," added George, wishing to adhere to facts.

"I ought to have got 'em," whispered Thane, in a fit of deepest abasement.

"You! Why?" asked the other, puzzled.

"Yes—I ought." Then, with a terrible wrench at his pride and stubbornness, torn with horror at the thought of that fearful risk his brother had incurred, Thane's childish heart melted, and he confessed brokenly:

"'Cause . . . 'cause if you had drowned it would have been my fault," he sobbed; "'cause jus' as I throwed for that bull *dol'ossi*—I didn't *open* my eyes, but somethin' pulled 'em open . . . my eyelashes, I mean . . . I dunno

how they comed open, but I jus' found 'em apart—so." He sat up in bed, facing the earnest gaze of George's gentle blue eyes regarding him with sorrowful intent. By the light of the moon shining in through the unshuttered window George could see the child's long lashes fluttering slightly apart. "I didn't *open* 'em," Thane repeated earnestly, "but jus' as I throwed they came apart—just a tiny, wee bit; but that water-rat saw and threw it at me—the beast!"

The mighty task of confession was over, and the little boy looked expectantly to his brother for that balm of consolation which never was withheld.

"You didn't *mean* to look, Thane," George said, generously.

Thane lay back on his pillow, the heart-ache considerably assuaged.

"But that beast threw it at me," he murmured, "and you—you stood up to him—and when I couldn't sleep I thought you might have been drowned and dead—and me—here—lying by myself—all alone," and little Thane's voice again grew hoarse with grief.

George put out a hand and laid it on his brother's.

"Don't think of that any more. . . . See, we will hold hands; then you can be sure I am here."

"You believe me, don't you, George," sighed the contrite Thane.

"'Course I do; you don't tell lies," George responded, heartily.

The little chap's hand snuggled closer within the warm clasp.

"You do comfort a chap, George," he said, sleepily. Then the long lashes fell peacefully over the closed eyes of both the boys as they passed into untroubled sleep.

VI

IT was in the grey dawn that Brandon, waking to miss his wife from his side, crept down the passage that led to the room where the children slept. Through the unshuttered window stole the dim light of the new day. Brandon, halting in the doorway, gazed wrathfully at the spectacle of his wife kneeling beside the bed, while stretched across the feet of her sleeping brothers crouched Margery ; both mother and daughter intent, as it seemed, on satisfying themselves as to George's well-being.

Seized with the thought that in this boy was bound up, not only his own personal content and happiness, his stay in the years to come, but the very existence of his wife and the sole strong influence for good on the lives of Margery and Thane, Brandon's brain reeled at the bare remembrance of that fathomless, silent pool. His eyes, like the eyes of his wife and daughter, remained fixed on the brothers lying side by side, with locked hands.

■

BOOK ONE

I

ON an afternoon at the close of the winter of nineteen-hundred-and-one, when the Monster of War still pressed heavily upon the blackened wastes of the Northern Transvaal, the unflecked blue of the African sky looked down upon the solitary post-house lying snugly in the shadow of the lofty mountain range, lost in the immensity of the flat, inexpressive plain.

For mile upon mile—to north and south, to east and west of The Outspan—away to the furthest limits of the boundless horizon the land lay silent and solitary, washed in the fading sunlight slipping over the gaunt, stern, passionate face of the veldt. Barren and monotonous, parched to the verge of unsightliness as that face may have appeared at this season of the year to the uninitiated traveller voyaging across this ocean of the earth-world, it yet was stamped with that sublimity of vastness, that majesty of the primeval and changeless which so passionately endears it to the sons of the soil—those primitive, rugged folk, the veldt-dwellers, who live in closest sympathy with the very pulsing of her mighty heart.

Like life, the veldt is monotonous yet full of sharp surprises. Like death, it is a mighty leveller. The traveller who from early dawn to late afternoon traverses its undulating waste—soundless as it might have been in the period before Creation's dawn—falls unconsciously as day advances beneath the spell of its strange magic. He forgets his former unfavourable verdict upon the veldt-world. Its enchantment has conquered his senses. He finds it no longer repellent; instead, it

begins to fascinate, for its beauty lies in its bigness, in its strength, in its simplicity, and these begin to reveal themselves to him.

The amazing silence, the unutterable solitude, the cool, dry air, the untameable aspect, the illimitable expanse—all become wonderfully fascinating, worthy even of worship. He passes mile after mile of sand and bush, of scrub and boulder. He sees the little white thorn beloved of African deserts, the patches of cacti and milk-bushes, the clumps of golden-blossomed mimosa trees. So long as he glimpses in the distance the rocky *kopjes* upon which the grey-green aloes point their crimson spires to heaven, so long he feels that life has its compensations. The wild, dreamy, open veldt gives his imagination, his spiritual senses, free play. The veldt speaks to him and her voice is of the primeval and the inevitable.


Suddenly life reveals itself in its true perspective, its true colours. He finds himself viewing with scorn the accepted, the conventional; looking beyond the poor, stale mask of human subterfuges, of human hypocrisies; recoiling before the thought of humanity's feeble, hampering, idiotic laws and customs, of humanity's pitiful idols, of its tin-pot gods. Littleness is swept out of his soul, and to his mind and brain are revealed the real essentials of life—truth, passion, suffering, struggle—these alone are the eternal verities.

From afar, on the western horizon, a crimson light fills earth and air and sky and plain. With majestic approach it advances and the dust-cloud, that throughout the day's journey has clung lovingly to the traveller, now turns to an opaque red pall. Through it, stifling and suffocated, he struggles forward—blinded, befogged, lost in an ocean of ruddy hue. Still he toils doggedly onward through the maze of darkness. It is the fog of life which he adventures—the fog through which a purblind humanity must each in turn stumblingly pass. It is the blood-red stream of life carrying him onward—the stream down which we all are borne to the goal of death.

But, as is the way of all life's fogs, granted patience and sooner or later they lift, so with the traveller wrapped in the crimson pall of the suffocating fog of the veldt-world. Even as it comes to him that his strength is spent, the track is lost and the end of all things is at hand, ghostlike the pall lifts and disappears, and he sees before him the shaggy, boulder-crowned height of World's View overshadowing The Outspan—the house of rest and refreshment for man and beast—the goal to which since earliest dawn he has been pressing.

The open doors of the post-house throw out a hospitable welcome and he joyfully draws rein.

Truly the veldt, like life, has its sharp surprises.



II

THE crimson ball of the sun was declining over World's View, leaving the garden of the post-house in the shade of the branching trees while lighting up the row of back windows facing west. Long beams of roseate light beat upon the stone-paved floor of the kitchen, climbed the white-washed walls and clung to the thick, black rafters and tarred cross-beams supporting the high-arched, unceiled roof.

The sunlight played about the smooth, rounded arms—bared almost to the shoulders—of Margery Brandon, as she flashed the long-handled mop, now out, now in the sides of the shining enamelled saucepans ranged in order along the wooden settle fixed in the corner of the big chimney-place.

Splash, splash—the last shining utensil was vigorously whirled round in the trough of steaming water as, with a tired, white face and aching back, she straightened herself from her stooping position over the wooden tub.

The door behind her was thrown open with sudden impetus by a tall, broad-shouldered young giant with notably dark, frowning brows.

"Margery, hurry up with some tea and grub, will you? A fellow has just turned up; says he must be on the move again soon."

Margery Brandon swung round towards her brother. One saw, as they faced each other, the striking resemblance between these well-built, iron-willed, strong-natured scions of the Brandon family.

She spoke with a quick, low-toned impatience :

"I can't make the tea till the water boils. Do give the fire a poke while I set the tray." Then, as with a certain rapid deliberation she dried her shapely arms on the roller-towel fixed above the wooden settle and proceeded to set out crockery and edibles upon a big, round dinner-tray, she demanded the absurd reason of the traveller's haste in a country where leisure is the rule of life.

Thane Brandon was applying the bellows to the already roaring flame shooting up the vast maw of the stoutly-built chimney.

"There, burn up, will you?" he exclaimed aggressively, addressing the fire; then turning to his sister as she moved swiftly between pantry and dresser: "Oh," he explained, "seems he's one of the Irregulars trying to catch up with his comrades on the border. They left him down with fever—in Rhodesia somewhere—and he's followed up on horseback."

"What a long ride! . . . and after a bout of fever, too. Australian, is he?"

Thane nodded.

"And tough—says his name's Woodward; he's an officer; a captain, so he says." His keen, steel-grey eyes fell on the row of newly-scoured pots and pans: "I say, have you had to turn to *this*? What a confounded nuisance the niggers clearing off! Pretend they're afraid of the Boer troops. It's nothing of the kind—simply an excuse for a spree."

"They'll be back as soon as the Boers clear out from this part."

"Lazy devils! We'll be left in a nice mess if they don't turn up soon. Where's old Lisbeth? Couldn't she do this?" he waved a sun-browned hand towards the array on the settle.

"Washing clothes," Margery explained, laconically.

"And Babs?"

His sister laughed.

"She can't scrub pots."

"I didn't mean that," Thane said gruffly.

Margery raised her eyebrows, thick and dark like his own.

"Well, Babs is in the garden, I expect; I left her there busy over some gardening, and no doubt you'll find her still at it if you want her."

Thane stooped to give another vigorous application of the bellows. Then he said, hesitatingly:

"No . . . I only thought you might have sent her to ask Johanna to come round and help. She would—willingly."

Margery's lips, curved and red, pressed ominously together. In silence she moved across the room, piling plates, cold meat, bread, butter, a dish of preserved fruits and a bowl of thick, golden cream upon the groaning tray.

"You did not send?" her brother persisted.

"No," she admitted, shortly; "Jo is too fond of coming round."

"What do you mean?" his deep voice rose to a growl.

"Just that," she replied simply; "you can't marry her—you don't mean to, since this war business. Well, she thinks you owe it to her."

"What rot! One Boer daughter-in-law in the family is enough, and too many, I am thinking." His voice dropped and grew confidential: "I say, Margery, have you noticed—George?"

She nodded comprehendingly.

"He thinks he ought to go—if they call for more men."

"Confound it all!" Thane growled; "he *can't* think it his duty?"

"That's the trouble," she said below her breath; "George was always such a boy for bothering his head about what was right."

She turned from a contemplation of the tray.

"There, that will do for the tough Australian; I must just make the tea. Oh, thanks; you have made it,"

as her brother handed the tea-pot and hot-water jug with a :

"Well, I must get back to help in the bar ; fellows are crowding in from all sides to hear news of the Irregulars . . . *they* are not far off now. This fellow had better look smart or the Boers 'ull cop him."

"Where's father ?" asked Margery, picking up her weighty burden.

"Old man in the store doing a roaring trade," Thane replied, throwing open the inner door ; "George is down ; been busy all the afternoon helping old Jonas to cut up forage—confound those devils !"

With which adjuration at the recreant natives he flung himself through the doorway into the passage which ran the length of the farmhouse. His sister followed, the tray in her capable hands. Passing into the dining-room she set it down at the end of the long dinner-table, and spreading a white cloth over the polished linoleum surface laid out the repast.

III

FROM his station before the unshuttered window, crimsoned by the glories of the setting sun, the slim-built, wiry, khaki-clad soldier watched her deft movements with an abstracted air.

To Philip Woodward—as his brain waveringly recorded the personality of the heavy-eyed, pale-faced woman in the plain print gown, with bared arms and throat and ruffled hair—Margery Brandon appeared but the usual farmhouse drudge. He set her down over his repast as daughter-in-law to the old man, wife to the good-looking young giant who had conducted him to his present quarters. Beyond paying a passing tribute to the meal she had prepared for him, he thought no more of her.

She had spoken but a word or two before leaving the room. Now, her voice, singularly low and bell-toned, recurred to his memory, dwelling pleasantly in his ear. He experienced a desire to hear those clear, deep tones again. *

Curiosity over the opposite sex, he reminded himself, had proved the beginning of final disaster to many among his fellows. No woman's man—because of a youthful disillusionment—Woodward dismissed the weary-looking drudge from his thoughts as he ate and drank.

A little girl, with richly-dark auburn curls shading her wide, innocent eyes and whitely-rosy, rounded face, passed through the room, bestowing an intent scrutiny upon the stranger.

"Hullo! little one. You live here, do you?" he questioned in friendly fashion.

Barbara Brandon opened her dark eyes in child-like scornful amaze.

"Where else should I live?" she demanded impatiently.

"Any other little people about?" Woodward asked pleasantly.

Another scornful glance alone answered his query.

"Not, eh? That's bad for you; Mr. Brandon's daughter, are you?—or granddaughter I should think more probably," suddenly recollecting the drudge with the tuneful voice.

The pretty child's scorn gave place to pity, and she grew fluent in her desire to instruct this very ignorant grown-up.

"We haven't any grandchildren here since George's little ones died. George is my brother—didn't you see him over at the stables? He's married, and lives at the Top Farm; but his dear little babies"—her tones grew earnest, her eyes tragic—"are buried down at the bottom of the garden. We have such a sweet little cemetery there, full of trees and flowers. I'll take you to see it." She held out her hand confidently as she suddenly promised the kindly-faced traveller this great treat. "Wouldn't you like to see it?" she questioned, with innocent enthusiasm.

"Not this time, I am afraid," Woodward replied, smiling at her strange idea of a treat. He took the little, plump brown hand between his own, and looking into the dark, greenish-grey, jewel-bright eyes of the child it occurred to him that he had noticed a similar glinting gleam in the eyes of the pale-faced woman.

"Another time I am sure I should enjoy it extremely," he assured the little girl, "if the Fates ever permit of my return. But I don't know what to call you—"

"I was christened Barbara—after mother," she explained importantly, "but I am being called Babs till I grow up; when I am as big as Margery—"

"Babs! Babs!" the voice came from the doorway, and was low, forceful, imperative. Babs started, and

withdrew her small, moist fingers from Woodward's grasp.

"It's Margery," she explained; "she's calling me." She ran from the room, shaking back her tangle of hair and answering the call in a clear, childish treble: "Yes, Margey."

"What a pretty child!—sweet ways, too. Will she, like 'Margery' of the haunting voice, grow up to the lot of a weary-eyed, white-faced drudge," Woodward questioned, as he rose from the table and made his way to the smoke-room used by the travelling public.

IV

THIS—a long, low-ceiled apartment—opened out from the passage which ran the length of the house. It was smoke-room, bar-room, and general *zit-kamer* combined, its capacity for numbers largely assisted by the adjacent stoep on to which both a door and window opened directly.

As Woodward, at the opposite end of the room, awaited the barman's production of his bill, his unobtrusive but penetrative glances took note of the Boers congregated about the room and on the stoep—lazing, arguing, smoking, drinking.

In their midst, in his shirt-sleeves, Thane Brandon sat astride a chair, sparring with a group of men in corduroy breeches into which were belted flannel shirts. On their unkempt, sandy-coloured heads were set wide-brimmed smashers, and *veldt-schoens* covered their big, flat feet. They carried *sjamboks* in their unwashed, hairy hands, while cartridge-belts and rifles were slung across the portly forms of several among their number.

"Fact is," said one burly old Boer—a peaceful neighbour to the Brandons, judging by his lack of arms—"you're a burgher, *neef*. You've taken the oath of allegiance to Kruger, and though your blood is *Engelsch*—more's the pity—you can't go against that oath without being a traitor."

"*Almachtig!* Brandon," interrupted a younger Boer, armed and fiery-eyed, "but you're a *blooded* burgher, too! Haven't you and I fought side by side for Oom

Paul in the nigger wars? Nay, never try and get out of it, man! Kruger's calling for you again; *onze land* is calling for you again; fight you must, since you are here."

Thane tilted his head defiantly.

"I'll not fight, du Bruyn," he said calmly, addressing the old Boer, "neither for nor against Kruger. A burgher I am, as you say, but I am an Englishman also."

"But born and bred in the Transvaal," the younger Boer interpolated quickly.

"*Heer!*" growled du Bruyn, removing his pipe from between his grizzly-bearded lips, "but they are coming, *neef*. Don't you hear what these fellows say. The *Commandant* has made Petrus Bouwer recruiting sergeant, and he is on the trail after you and George. He may be here to-day, to-morrow, any day now—enlisting men to defend the Northern Transvaal; that's what the Government's after. They may spare me because I am an old man, and they'll let your father off because his work is to keep the store and stables going on here; but you, Thane Brandon, burgher to Paul Kruger, they'll not overlook."

"I'll fight for neither Boer nor Briton," Thane repeated, obstinately.

"Then you'll get *sjamboked* for a skulker, or *scheit* for a deserter if you try running away," interposed a thick-set, red-bearded Boer fiercely, and his dirt-grimed hands fingered the rifle slung to his side.

Thane's steel-grey eyes gazed upon the speaker contemptuously.

"Who's running away?" he inquired, politely.

"You—when the summons comes along," rapped out the Dutchman.

"You lie, you damned fool!" Thane responded with quiet emphasis, getting to his feet, rising slowly to his great height.

Hostile faces glared at him, but the old Boer waved his countrymen aside with a movement of his malodorous black clay.

"Let the youngster alone," he growled, addressing them, with guttural oaths interlarding his speech, in the *taal*, "he'll fight right enough when the time comes. The dear Lord knows he's got lots of fight in him. He's worth half a dozen of you d——d skulking Transvaalers. I've known him ever since he was born."

Woodward, his bill settled, turned to leave the room. Lowering looks from the Boers followed him. Thane, observing these, slowly stalked from the apartment, and the two young men walked together in the direction of the stables.

"Is it true?" asked the soldier. "Are you and your brother really in danger of being enlisted?"

"If those damn fellows speak the truth the recruiting sergeant and his men may be here any moment now," Thane returned in a tone of irritability. "Damn it all! this comes of the licking you fellows are giving them. Kruger is badly off for men."

"But surely you will be allowed a choice—Englishmen, of purely British descent?"

Thane shrugged his broad shoulders.

"It's Hobson's choice—fight, or have a bullet put into you from behind. I don't worry on my own account," he added carelessly, "I can very easily give 'em the slip. But there's George—my brother."

His arm swung in the direction of the stables and Woodward looked with interest at the tall, golden-haired young man standing hatless in the doorway. At sight of that pleasant, open face with the calm, deeply-blue eyes, the short, trim yellow beard and glinting hair, a picture drifted before Woodward's mind which he failed at the moment to identify.

Thane was speaking hesitatingly.

"Yes, it comes rough on George because he has a wife—and a conscience."

"A Dutch wife, perhaps?" asked Woodward, shrewdly, "and feels, no doubt, that he ought to defend his hearth and home from invasion?"

Thane nodded.

"It's damned hard! Yes, he married the daughter of that old Dutchman you saw smoking in the bar—the one who stood up for me. He is our nearest neighbour. We were born on this place—George and I—and grew up with his girls—with all the girls and boys in the district, I might say. They are our friends—all of them; all the friends we ever have had, or care to have, for that matter—we know no others. And, now, we are asked to stand up and shoot at 'em, or shoot at our own blood-brothers, or be shot ourselves! A nice position this cursed war lands us in—and others like ourselves."

"A hard case," repeated Woodward thoughtfully, and said no more for now they had reached the entrance to the stables from out of which his horse was being led.

George Brandon in simple, kindly fashion and in pleasant tones, which came as an echo of the woman's bell-toned voice, was wishing him a safe journey.

"Though it is a risky fifty-mile ride you'll have to do. We hear the Irregulars are just this side of the river."

"I have escaped thus far falling into the Boer clutches," Woodward replied, "so hope to get safely to my comrades in the end."

"You were left—where?" inquired old Brandon, who had joined his sons.

"At Tuli, with an attack of fever. And now," Woodward added, addressing the brothers as he gathered up his reins, "if things come to a head here why not join us till the crisis is over? You would neither be asked nor expected to do any fighting," he said, with a kindly look at George; "your position makes it impossible for you to take sides. Remember, I will gladly do anything I can for you and yours."

"Thanks muchly," the words came from both Thane and his father; but George remained silent, and stood for a few moments lost in thought, a shadow on his usually fair, unclouded face, the while the horse's hoofs—of the departing traveller rang out fainter and fainter—until lost in the distance of the trail leading south.

V

A LONG the broad, well-worn, ruddy high-road leading south, across the monotonous expanse of the bare brown plain, past boulder-strewn *kopies* and patches of sand and scrub, Philip Woodward rode again on the track of his comrades.

His thoughts, which should have been centred upon the task which lay before him, unwittingly again and again escaped his control and returned to lodge beneath the roof-tree of the post-house at the foot of the overshadowing mountain.

They lingered around the family born under that roof-tree, around the complications which had arisen to set brother against brother, friend against friend, neighbour against neighbour, in the cruel shadow of the Monster that had crept over the land.

But, like bees returning to and settling upon some lowly, unobtrusive but strangely-attractive perfumed flower nestling close to mother-earth, his fancy would stray from these thoughts to return to, and settle upon the image of the young-old, tired-faced woman with the averted, alluring, greenish-grey eyes and the haunting tones.

What had her life known of warmth, ease, colour, passion? Her blood-red lips, so noticeable against the pallor of her skin, seemed to bespeak a temperament warm and emotional beneath the cold exterior of a rather forbidding mask. When she had moved before him with supreme unconsciousness, her face expressionless, her

manner prim, her attire plain and inelegant, he had yet been strangely conscious of being in the presence of something intangible, puzzling, interesting.

Then, almost before he had remarked it, she had slipped from the room, and excepting that he had heard the low, attractive tones calling the pretty child he had heard no more of her.

"Babs! Babs!" again he heard her voice distinctly and reproached himself that so experienced an amateur of human nature, as he prided himself on being, should have allowed some hidden force and mystery in this woman to have escaped the more minute observation it certainly deserved.

Her brother, with the Dutch wife and the conscience, he could now easily place. Surely, nowhere had he seen, in form, appearance, and expression, a closer living resemblance to Tennyson's conception of the noblest of men. His lips moved as he breathed the vision thus conjured from the recesses of his brain :

"His hair a sun that rayed from off a brow
Like hill-snow high in heaven ; the steel-blue eyes,
The golden beard that clothed his lips with light."

He thought of George Brandon's mighty arms, and chest and limbs. He thought of his handsome, honest face, of his simple sincerity, genuine kindness and good faith. And now this ghastly crisis, this ugly dilemma caused by the war had arisen to cross the daily round of his peaceful, well-ordered life, and stood confronting him. How, under these perverse circumstances, would such a man act? Woodward felt he would give something to know. He felt strangely interested in each and every member of this wayside family, living out their lives in the solitary remoteness of the Transvaal back-veldt.

He reflected that he would probably never hear or see more of them. After all, what was the real attraction that awoke within his heart the desire to hear more of them? He admitted the provocation even while he

derided it—it was the sense of mystery that hung about a tired-looking, white-faced drudge! He laughed aloud and felt after his pipe.

But, still, his brain revolved around the possibilities of her history. Had she known the fullness of love and paled beneath its stifling embraces? Or had she loved secretly and in vain? Or had love come to her only in dreams, while Time was snatching from her the reality as day by day she drudged, and paled, and withered to early decay and fall?

Again he found his thoughts centred upon the woman at the post-house, and for a fleeting moment he considered even seriously the possibility of their future meeting. Then, straightening his shoulders, he told himself that he must be dreaming! Impossible that he should ever again be led to the little post-house on the veldt. Already the Generals down south sat together considering terms of peace. Only too probably on rejoining his comrades it would be to find the Irregulars had already received instructions to move south, the first step in their final dispersion.

Whistling, he defied the machinations of Fate to entangle the threads of his life with the threads of the life of this unknown woman. He shrugged his shoulders, drew himself together, and once again, with set purpose to think no more of the matter, thrust his hand into his pocket after pipe and tobacco to dull his too fervid imagination.

And turning a bend in the track, which at this point diverged to the left of the *donga* he was skirting, he rode into an armed patrol consisting of the recruiting sergeant and his four stalwart attendants.

"Hands up!" cried the sergeant, airing with pride his scant English as he instantly scented a foe, "Hands up; or I fire!"

■

VI

THE silver-grey radiance that is generally to be found on the darkest night in Africa had fallen on the sleeping plain and overhanging mountain when the sound of horses' hoofs clattering into the stable-yard broke the silence reigning around the precincts of The Outspan.

The group of men left in the bar trooped forth on to the stoep. George and Thane Brandon with their father and old du Bruyn crowded around the steps leading from the verandah to the house front. Drawn up before them as they peered through the darkness was the form of Petrus Bouwer, the recruiting sergeant, followed by his men. They moved towards the verandah and a strange spectacle met the eyes of the watchers.

Between two armed troopers rode their late guest.

The men dismounted and came nearer to the stoep, leading their sweating horses.

"Hullo! What the devil's the row, Bouwer?" Thane called out, arrogantly.

The young Boer put forth a limp hand, and with the single word "*dag*" went the round of the company.

Then he turned and pointed at the prisoner.

"This man belongs to the enemy. If he will give his parole not to attempt escape, I shall leave him at The Outspan. If not—" the sergeant spat contemptuously and made a motion with his hairy hand toward his rifle.

Thane came down the steps. His hands in his trousers pockets, he lounged across to where Woodward still sat in the saddle.

"What will you do?" he asked in a lowered voice; then added significantly, "Surrender on parole, eh?"

Captain Woodward shrugged his shoulders.

"Seems I must," he murmured resignedly. As he got himself out of the saddle he bowed to the triumph of Destiny. "Our turn will come, though," he told Thane.

Despite the chill of the winter night, the blood surged hotly through his body. He was elated, yet annoyed; pleased to have the chance of bettering his acquaintance with a family in whose immediate future he already felt a keen interest, yet displeased at finding his plans upset and fearing, almost unconsciously, to encounter disillusion and disappointment. Many a man before him had found his swans mere geese.

Now he had given his parole to Sergeant Bouwer and that painstaking officer of the Republic was addressing Brandon, who stood stupefied, recognizing in this young man whom he had known from infancy the dreaded recruiting sergeant.

"So they've given *you* the job, have they, Bouwer?" Thane asked, with careless contempt in his tones.

Bouwer, taking no notice of this pleasantry from an old chum, continued addressing the elder Brandon:

"I hand over this *Engelschman*—taken in arms against the Republic—to your charge, Mynheer Brandon. Guard him well, for you answer with your life to the *Commandant* for his escape."

Brandon looked hard at the prisoner thus thrust upon him. Woodward advanced, raising his cap.

"Have no uneasiness, Mr. Brandon," he said, pleasantly, "I am here to stay."

"We will fix you up as comfortably as we can," Brandon replied, relieved by the tone and bearing of his guest.

He turned to the sergeant:

"Your work is done, Bouwer. Come in and have a drink."

Bouwer hesitated, then dug his hand into the wallet hanging to his saddle and pulled out a dirty-white paper.

"Fact is, Mynheer Brandon," he began, discarding

in his new importance the life-long "*Oom*"; "fact is I have another duty to perform. We overtook this *Engelschman* as we were on our way here on official duty. This proclamation I have orders to read at every farmhouse in the district."

He opened out the paper, raised it in his hands, and held it at an angle upon which the light from the lantern hanging in the verandah fell direct.

"Damn your proclamation!" said Brandon, slowly, with a bitter intensity that was caught up and echoed by every man among the group surrounding him. He turned his back on the Sergeant.

"By order of the Republic," Bouwer spouted glibly, "To the loyal and faithful Burghers of Paulus Johannes Kruger, President——"

In wooden, sing-song tones he waded through the specially prepared form to which the names of the young Brandons had been appended. They were warned to hold themselves in readiness to join the Republican forces at any moment when called upon so to do. In consideration of this they might retain their horses and rifles; but should they fail, when summoned, to report themselves at their respective posts within twenty-four hours, these would immediately be seized by the Government, all their possessions would be confiscated, and they themselves would incur the penalty of death as traitors to their country.

In consideration of his services to the Republic as manager of The Outspan, Brandon senior would be exempt from service.

So ran the proclamation, and it was received by the inmates of the post-house in a silence more emphatic than words.

Once more Bouwer dived into the wallet to draw forth a second dirty-white paper, to which was affixed, in rude sprawling caligraphy, the name of Jan du Bruyn.

The grey-bearded, burly old Boer, his pipe between his lips, his fleshy, unwashed hands clutching the top rail

of the verandah, stood stolidly eyeing the recruiting sergeant.

"*Heer!*" Bouwer observed in an undertone to his attendants. "I like not the look of these folk. Keep your arms ready in case of accidents."

Then, clearing his throat, he again read aloud the proclamation. But to this document was affixed the name of Jan du Bruyn of du Bruyn's Rust, neighbour to Brandon of The Outspan.

The blow fell in full force. The old Boer grew rigid with anger, hot with apprehension. He had felt so certainly that his three-score-and-ten years would excuse him. His hand shook as he endeavoured to remove the pipe from his mouth. The brown, highly-seasoned clay fell to the stone-paved floor of the verandah and crashed to atoms.

Jan du Bruyn's florid face paled, his light blue eyes bulged. He leaned heavily on the rail, conscious through all his stunned amazement that the eyes of all present were fixed upon him.

"*Me*, is it?" he gasped at last. "*Me*, Petrus Bouwer, who was a boy together with your dead father, that you are reading papers over to go out and fight? *Man*," he raised a pointing hand, "are *all* our burghers killed off that Paul Kruger is calling out the grey-beards who have borne the heat and burden of the day for well-nigh four-score years?"

He stood resting heavily on the supporting rail, his burly frame bowed and quivering, his eyes threatening, his hand upraised, as he peered across the dim space that separated him from the young Boer. Out of the house trooped the women folk and such of the house-servants as had crept back to the post-house under cover of darkness. Even the barman left his deserted corner and came forward to join the rest.

"*Man*," Bouwer called back, amid the tense silence of the listeners, "the Republic is calling grandsires of ninety and boys of nine! You *may* never be summoned——"

"And if I am, Petrus Bouwer?" bellowed out the angry man.

"Then, Jan du Bruyn, you must go!" shouted back the other.

"Or——?" demanded du Bruyn fiercely.

"Or you are branded traitor, Jan du Bruyn."

"Thanks, Petrus—in your dead father's name I thank you for that word. But what of Majuba, when I fought by his side?"

"That does not count here, *Oom*."

"Nor of the nigger wars, *neef*—again and again, since I was but a lad of fifteen?"

"They count nothing against this last summons from your country."

"Soh——"

Hurried footsteps, a swish of skirts, a wail from the background, agitated the sudden pause in hostilities. A snarl like the snarl of an angry cat, an explosive cry of wrath and pain, and Bouwer found himself confronted by three angry countrywomen. Like a solid wall of defence they interposed their persons between himself and du Bruyn. He knew these women, had known them all his life. The corpulent, asthmatic Tante Jacoba was the grey-beard's better half, the two handsome young women were the daughters of the old couple. One of them he had desired and sought in marriage.

But, now——

It was she, George Brandon's young wife, who was the first to attack him. She tossed back the wealth of yellow hair that hung loosely about her smooth, fair brow and shrilled disdainfully:

"Fie then! aren't you 'shamed? So it is *you*, Petrus Bouwer, who would bring dirty papers here to send Pa to fight? Go and fight yourself and leave old men to look after the women and farms."

"I *am* fighting, Aletta," began Bouwer, apologetically; but Johanna, the younger sister, cut him short.

"Fighting, are you? *Heer!* it looks to us as though

you are on a softer job altogether—riding round the country, serving papers on old men. You shan't get Pa, though."

"Never!" snorted Mrs. du Bruyn, catching him by the coat-cuff and swaying his arm unpleasantly to and fro. "Never, I say, Petrus Bouwer! you don't touch my old man, not if I've got to shoot you myself with your own *roer*! *Heer*! man, never start back; I'm not going to do it—not till someone tries to carry off my man. And hear my words, *neef*! Didn't the Lord give you a good old mother and father that you must needs be doing this devil's work, shaming the old folk in their graves? Think, if they were alive this day, would you be serving papers on your white-haired father—and he to be torn from your mother in their old age? Never! You could not do it! your own mother would curse you!"

"Tear up that paper, Bouwer," Aletta Brandon said more softly, sidling closer to him; "the Republic will be none the wiser."

"Yes," added her husband, who had joined the group round Bouwer, "we are all friends here."

Bouwer glanced nervously at his attendants.

"The *Commandant*——" he began, hesitatingly. Then his tones grew firmer:

"I've read the proclamation, and I'll be hanged if I stop here arguing with a lot of laggards and *rebels*," his loud tones were significant. "Mount, men," he added, turning to his escort.

He raised his foot to the stirrup. Aletta in an instant swung herself forward, and caught at his arm.

"Spare my father, Bouwer," she entreated. "Think, man, I'm giving up my husband! I'm sending the Boer army a brave Englishman, a clever one, too, to help them in their fight against England! How many Boer women, I wonder, can say as much? In return, tear up the paper with Pa's name on it and say nothing."

Bouwer looked down into her fair, upturned face with the flashing blue eyes now burning with hot entreaty. She

was begging a favour of him. Not long since, he told himself, and he would have granted any request of hers within his power, to win her for himself. Now she was the wife of his rival. He muttered in the *taal* she must be satisfied to wait . . . he might . . . perchance in the future. . . . She stepped back, content.

"What is that you are saying, Aletta?" her husband asked in surprise.

She drew him on one side.

"You will go, to save my father, George?"

"Don't ask, my girl. I am an Englishman."

"But a burgher—Kruger's subject. George, you will fight for our country—yours and mine?"

Never before had she asked the question outright. Though the matter secretly had long troubled husband and wife, it had remained undiscussed by either. Aletta had feared the certainty of a refusal; George Brandon had arrived at no decision.

Now he spoke on the impulse of the moment:

"How can I fight my own race and blood? I'll not do it."

"You will fight for our people, for our country, for the safety of your own home, and family, and possessions or Aletta du Bruyn will never more be wife to you," the young Boer woman cried impulsively.

"Aletta——"

He spoke her name softly, resting his hand on her arm. She flung it off impatiently and with a muttered threat joined her parents on the stoep.

Amid a chorus of choice *taal* oaths and anathemas, culled chiefly from the Scriptures and freely showered upon him by the company, Petrus Bouwer, a peculiar smirk of content playing around his bearded lips, rode out of the yard, followed by the Boer patrol.

VII

AS the sound of the beat of their horses' hoofs on the hard road died gradually away, George Brandon, taking no adieu of the chattering group vehemently discussing the situation, passed silently through the house and out by way of the back verandah into the garden, and so down the familiar pathway that led to his home.

Light steps, hurrying after him, caused him to pause ere crossing the rustic bridge that spanned the stream at the bottom of the garden, and linked the post-house to the Top Farm homestead lying against the mountain-side.

But the steps were too light to be long mistaken for the more masculine tread of the heavily-built Aletta. It was Margery's voice that called through the night :

"You are not going off without Aletta, George?" she asked breathlessly, coming up to him. In the moonshine her face raised to his appeared white and youthful again.

George turned from her in the direction of his home.

"She'll follow—when they have talked things over. I must get home; there's only old Sanna and a raw girl left to see to everything."

Margery put her hand on his arm to detain him

"George," she said presently, and there was that in her tone that went to his heart, "*Don't . . don't . . .*"

Her voice failed her, but he understood and answered slowly :

"I must do what I think right, Margey."

Even as he spoke he felt the relief of words. Though blamed, though misunderstood by all his world, he knew

that he could rely on his sister for perfect comprehension, for unbounded sympathy and loyal, generous support whatever his decision might be.

"Don't think only of what is right," she broke out vehemently, "think of *us*, too. It's not only your safety . . . your life, perhaps . . . it's *our* lives as well—father's, mine, Thane's."

He stooped and put his arm about her shoulders.

"Don't worry now . . . I must think it over, old girl. Life seems suddenly to have become too big a complication for plain straight-going chaps out here—English-Transvaalers, as we Brandons are: we must just do our duty and leave the tangle."

He broke off, then allowed her kiss and was gone. With choking breath and a strained look on her white face his sister watched him cross the bridge and climb the opposite slope that led by an easy ascent along the winding track up the mountain-side to the half-way plateau on which the homestead was built.

Then, with a stifled sigh and a hard word thrown at the war, she returned to the house.

But George, shaking aside his disquieting thoughts as he opened the gate in the hedge that separated the frontage of the farm-house from the track which continued its winding course up the mountain-side, passed within and applied himself to the tasks immediately before him. In the farmyard the cows were lowing over the bush-fence that separated them from their young, shut up in the calf-pen. The calves were wailing in return, amazed at the long-delayed milking-hour.

"How is this, Sanna?" inquired the master, addressing the old native woman whom he found crouching before the fire in the snug, warm kitchen of the farmhouse, "No milking done yet?"

She rose to her feet, spreading out her hands.

"No boys, baas; him very frighten of Boers—come back p'laps by-m-by," she explained in broken English.

"Well, we must manage without them to-night; I hope they'll be back in the morning; no Boers about, Sanna."

She shook her head incredulously.

"Boer fightin' man vely slim, baas."

"Well, bring the buckets to the *kraal*," commanded her master as he hastily left the house, striding towards the pens of the impatient animals; and wondering in their own minutely subtle fashion as to what had become of the 'missis,' Sanna and the raw girl, taking down the shining pails from their shelves, followed silently.

By the time the cows were milked, the calves fed and housed, the grunting, squealing pigs supplied with a late supper, and the recreant fowls—who, with strange perversity, preferred roosting in the bush to roosting upon the perches within their own stoutly-built poultry-run—had been collected and locked therein safe from the attentions of the wild-cat or an occasional stray jackal, the silvery rim of the quarter moon was dipping below the horizon and the great stars were stabbing points of radiance more clearly upon the dark, velvety pall of the sky. George, walking back to the house, rested for a moment on the doorstep, lifting his eyes to the dim outline of World's View, as the culminating point of the mountain—a flat, boulder-strewn height—was locally named. Through the density of the early night it appeared to overshadow the homestead with a certain dark menace. Tired and troubled, he shifted his gaze still higher and the silence of the night, with the myriad of purple, radiating star-clusters overhead, brought a sense of protection and comfort to his heart. God's heaven was above him. Nothing in Nature was changed. His own personal relations alone were disorganized and violently disrupted. His life had reached a crisis.

He entered the house. The old woman had lit the lamp in the dining-room, had kindled a wood fire on the open hearth and set the supper as usual. For two?—then she evidently expected the return of her mistress, thought

George, and this trivial circumstance brought relief. He glanced again at the spread table, then passed into the bath-room adjoining the bedroom and washed his hands. He felt chilly, glanced at his shirt-sleeves, and suddenly remembered having left his coat hanging on a hook outside the stables at The Outspan. Boucher's advent was responsible for this unusual absence of mind, he meditated.

Mechanically he moved into the bedroom, opened the wardrobe, and taking out a tweed Norfolk coat proceeded to don it. As his arms moved he glanced from side to side through the dimness, as though striving to convince himself that his missing wife was there. Never before at this hour had she been absent from his side. Never before had he sat lonely to his evening meal. The thought that she might refuse to return unconditionally was gall and wormwood to the young man. The war would pass, peace would come again to the land, but never again to the household in which the conflict had put asunder the love of man and wife. With Aletta's love turned to scorn, his life would be bereft, his home desolate.

"The baas must come and eat ; see, I have brought in the broiled chops from the fat buck the baas shot before sun-up yesterday, and the fried potatoes and the coffee." Old Sanna's voice roused him from his unbearable thoughts. She stood in the doorway, with the lighted candle in her hand showing up the patient expression on her chocolate-brown face and a look of mingled anxiety and curiosity in her coal-black eyes. George made a motion with his hand, then followed her retreating form into the dining-room.

Supper over, he selected a briar from the rack above the chimney-piece, and drawing up the deep leather arm-chair closer before the fire fell again into a similar train of thought. But, now, he resolutely pushed aside the question of Aletta's attitude, of her return, and applied himself to threshing out the supremely important matter of his duty at the crisis which had now presented itself—a matter which he knew he must face and decide upon without further delay.

He was a man imbued with a high conception of duty. What was his duty, he now asked himself, in the present unprecedented state of affairs? His country was invaded by an enemy who were daily advancing upon them; the very hearth before which he sat, the roof-tree which sheltered him, his farmstead, his cattle, his crops—all began to be in imminent danger of destruction and pillage at the hands of these invaders unless he and his fellow-burghers kept them at bay. Setting aside all personal considerations, he was a son of the land to whom that land was dear. Setting altogether on one side the woman he loved, he felt he should join his countrymen-in-arms solely because he conceived it to be his duty so to do. Setting aside his family, to whom he was devotedly attached, he felt that he would desist from joining the forces of the Republic only because he was persuaded that this was not his duty. George Brandon was too well versed in the affairs of the Old Country to be ignorant of the supreme fact that in the end British force must prove victorious, yet there remained with the young man the aspiration of every free-born Northern Transvaaler—the endeavour to keep the enemy at bay, so that as Boers of the vast tract of country lying afar from the centre of hot strife they might be found an unconquered people, their rifles in their hands, their homesteads intact, when the song of Peace was sung.

That song could not now be long delayed; should the burghers of the Northern Transvaal, then, unite in this patriotic endeavour the possibilities were that they might be successful, thus preserving their own personal liberty, their wives and families from the dreaded concentration camps, their homes and farms from destruction, and handing down to all future posterity a glorious record of self-defence against the invasions of a common foe.

Should he evade this duty patent to every burgher among the scattered community? He felt at heart that he could not do so and retain his self-respect, his simple standard of duty. Embued with a lofty ideal of duty as an

integral part of that highest in life which was bound up with all of the simple religion learned at his mother's knee, George Brandon was also a son of the land to whom that mother-land was dear. Duty, patriotism, affection, every highest instinct of his manhood called upon him to join in her defence at this sharp crisis in her history.

But there remained for his consideration the almost untenable situation that the men against whom he must take up arms were of his nationality and kin; blood-brothers to Thane and himself, subjects of the Empire beneath whose flag his parents, his forbears for generations past, had been born and bred, had lived and served and died!

Should he take up arms against Britain his father could not but suffer grievously. Thane, he felt, was already fiercely embittered against their old friends and neighbours, against the Boers as a people, simply from an unbearable fear and dread lest the brother he, in his own tempestuous fashion, loved and honoured so deeply should join the burgher ranks.

Was it his duty thus to grieve and embitter his own people?

The thought of Margery came to him as a fresh blow. She, he knew, cared not a rap for either Boer or Briton in comparison with the supreme fact of his joining in the conflict. Her fear was alone for his safety; and, looking into past years, recalling the past tragedy that had drawn the sister and brother so closely together, George Brandon felt a terrible doubt, a keen anxiety, as to how, without his continued presence and sympathy and daily companionship, his sister—changed by a cruel experience from headstrong, wilful girlhood to embittered, disillusioned womanhood—would find the patience to live out the grey, loveless, unmatred years of the future.

Weighing these considerations against the claims of duty, the young man asked himself in all sincerity whether he ought to join in his country's defence. Or again, was it not his duty to remain and care for his people?

But his country's *need* for the service of each and every one of her loyal sons again cried loudly and insistently in his ears, and pushing aside his chair he rose, leaning his elbow on the tall, narrow mantel. His head dropped on his arm, his eyes—down-bent—gazed into the red of the smouldering logs. Voiceless, he yet petitioned for guidance in the simply-sincere, direct fashion upon which his life from childhood upward had been moulded.

A sound without as of approaching footsteps quickened his pulses. The dogs barked suddenly, then fell into quiet, a sure sign that they welcomed a friend.

Aletta, followed by Johanna, entered the room.

The two sisters presented that contrasting type in form, colouring and feature so frequently to be found among Dutch South African families, with their admixture of Hollander and French blood. Aletta was a typical Hollander, with the fair, ruddy skin, large light-blue eyes—set below pale eyebrows and encircled by a tawny tangle of hair—and heavily-built frame of her countrywomen. In the moment of her entry, her deepened colour and the fire in her blue eyes added to her youthful attractiveness as she stood in the doorway looking silently towards her husband. Over her shoulder was framed the clear, olive-tinted oval of Johanna's more delicately-cut face. Her black arched brows and dark mass of hair surmounted a pair of wondrously soft Southern eyes. Pity for George looked out of those slumbrous, white-lidded dark-lashed eyes. He was the man to whose brother the Dutch girl had given her love, whom she had come to worship with all the fierce abandon of the Gallic in her blood—a passion beyond reason or control.

"Aletta?" George said slowly, questioningly, his voice breaking the spell of silence that hung over the three.

VIII

AS he called her name he turned to face her more directly, and his deep-set eyes, of so pure and soft a blue, contrasted strikingly with the hard glare of her intent gaze.

"Aletta—" his voice was persuasive—"you are late, my girl. I was getting a bit anxious, thinking of going to look you up. Thanks, Jo, for bringing her."

He spoke with an effort at repressing all signs of his late disquieting reflections; of that abrupt, unsatisfactory parting outside the post-house. He stood facing her, his back to the fireplace, one hand holding the smoking briar.

The air of the room was heavy with its fragrance; heavy, too, with those silent but tumultuous forces that were at work within the consciousness of all three. The crisis all recognized was at hand. That the man would decide the issue according to the dictates of his conscience, both women instinctively admitted.

Johanna gave her sister a shove that sent her further into the room.

"Yes, I've brought her," she said, feigning a jocularly she did not at the moment feel. "Take her, George; keep her, beat her if you must, or tie her up; but, for heaven's sake, don't let her get gadding round, listening to nonsense and talking rubbish. My word! but what a flow of cackle these young married women can pour out about nothing at all."

George advanced and put his arm round Aletta's plump shoulders.

"No, Johanna, I need not tie her up for she will never desert her man. Come, Aletta, how tired you look and so cold!" he took her hands in his. "Come, sit in the arm-chair and get warm, little woman."

Though Aletta could not boast of her husband's six foot odd, she was a tall woman, generously proportioned as to limb and bulk; yet she was to the lover who had watched her growth through the years of childhood and young womanhood, and who had never known the time when he did not love her, still, as ever, his "little one."

Aletta drew back determinedly.

"No, George, the trouble isn't so easily got over as all that," she said, speaking with firmness. "What I said this evening I meant," she turned pale. "George, don't think I have not realized all it means—all maybe that it is going to mean—this bitter, bitter cup put to our lips. Don't think, George, that its gall tastes less bitter to me than to you. . . . No, my God! No! . . ."

She raised her eyes searching her husband's face. They were determined, but her tone grew apologetic.

"George, I gave in to my father and mother, and to Jo here"—she swung her arm out towards her sister. "I said, when they kept on bothering me: 'Very well, as you all wish it I shall go and talk this thing over with my husband; maybe he will see some way out'—But I knew in my heart there was no way out—no way *but the one*."

"My husband, you have known me all my life," she had fallen to pleading. "Was there ever a time when a du Bruyn woman was anything less than an out-and-out patriot, glorying in *onze land*?—when, next to her father's God, she loved and prized anything or anyone more than her father's country, her father's nation and people—the *liberty* of the race from which she had sprung?"

"I gloried in my nation—the great Dutch South Africa built up in the Transvaal by our undaunted fathers, by our strong, brave mothers—the burgesses of our Republic. I worshipped our freedom; our position as a people of

a free Republic, governing ourselves; answerable to no outside Power for our actions; answerable only to God.

"Oh, George, you know," her voice grew strained and piteous—"you know, you always have known; this thing is not something new I am springing on you. How often have you not laughed at me—teased me? Isn't it so, as I say? Isn't it?"

Her eyes questioned as fiercely as her tones. Her husband felt the sincerity of her words, felt, too, that in admitting as much he was yielding to her unreasoning prejudice in the matter of his neutrality. Nevertheless he felt himself answering as one compelled:

"It is true."

She pulled back a chair from the table and sank upon it; her elbows rested upon the edge of the linoleum cover, her hands supported her hidden face. George moved and stood behind her, resting one hand on the bowed head.

"God knows what you say, Aletta, is true enough. Don't think I am reproaching you for the way you look at this. It is a loyal nature, and a true and noble one that loves its nation and country as you do. But, dear, there is another side in this question to be considered—*my nationality*; I am of British descent, of English blood."

"But a burgher," the muffled voice was obstinate. "Had you been born and bred in the Colony or Natal, and had married a Dutchwoman, there would have been no question as to your fighting for your King and country—British both."

She rose to her feet, resolutely facing him.

"That is how I look at it, George. Talking all night and for ever will never convince me that a man born and bred in the Transvaal, a sworn burgher of the Republic, is morally in the right to remain in hiding or to run away instead of making a stand against enemies who are invading the country—enemies who are attacking our President and our freedom! And, George, I don't believe you think it right either!"

She stood challenging the man whom experience had

taught her would disdain to lie as to his real convictions. Her husband replied shortly :

" I should not be right in fighting the English."

" That is evading my question—my argument," she cried hotly. " I ask if you think it right *not* to fight for Kruger against his enemies. Would you sit still if the Zulus were up against us ? "

" You know I would not. What is the use——"

" Or the Belgians ? or the Portuguese ? " she interrupted hastily.

" I should fight any invaders——"

" —but England," again she cut short his words. " How can that hold water ? It's absurd ! Believe me, George, you are being blinded to your duty in this thing by the words of others. Naturally, your father cannot like the idea of your taking up arms against England since he and your mother were born and brought up under the British flag. But ask yourself honestly, my husband—is it right for you to stand aside when our land is being invaded and attacked, our homes endangered, our possessions—our very lives—threatened ? Can this be right ? Tell me honestly that you think so. No, you cannot—you cannot ! "

Her voice rose triumphantly as she concluded the torrent of words she had poured forth, unconsciously falling into the *taal*, which as a rule she carefully refrained from using in her own home. With all her fierce patriotism, Aletta, like the majority of her sisters who had done the same, was proud of the fact that she had married an Englishman.

But her husband, who as a man and a burgher felt strongly the desire to assist his fellow-burghers in the task of resisting the invading forces, merely sighed impatiently. Then he said, good-naturedly :

" No one denies that it is the duty of our burghers to fight when the Transvaal is attacked ; but Aletta, child, you won't look at the question in any other light but just that one incontestable fact. See here, my girl. Think

for a moment of my position—an Englishman to fight England! Such a man is called a renegade, a traitor——”

Her voice fell to a deep note.

“Are the Dutch, then, who in the Cape and Natal are helping Great Britain to fight the Dutch—their *countrymen*—are these hundreds of Dutchmen renegades and traitors?”

“Answer me, George,” she demanded, as he remained mute, silenced by this fresh problem put before him.

He could find nothing to say. The whole wretched business of the war—in reality a grim, international conflict devastating the length and breadth of the great sub-Continent—was too complicated for George Brandon, or for any English-Transvaaler or Dutch-Cape-Colonist, satisfactorily to comment upon. Each man among those placed as he found himself placed must decide for himself as to the part he individually ought to play as a true patriot, as a loyal subject. Worn out by the struggle of a divided duty which had for so long occupied his anxious attention, the young man felt unable longer to discuss the vexed question; he longed only to set it aside for the time being.

“Let it drop for the present, Aletta. The question is not what a man ought to do in such a case—the wisest would find it hard to say. But the question just now is that I am dead tired and want to hear no more of it to-night. So let it drop, little woman.”

She bent towards him, her eyes flashing.

“I’ll let it drop by going out of your life, George! You will drive me from you! For do you think me a spoon-fed babe to live with a husband who is not *man* enough to fight when his fellows—yes, and women too—are being shot down every day?—when our land is being watered night and day with their blood? And for a *man* among us to be a-skulking and hiding, and talking cowardly-like of *duty*!” she raised her hand expressively, as though defending herself from the searching glance that had come into the deep blue eyes facing hers. “George, I am a

daughter of the brave *voor-trekkers*—of those men and women who faced hardships and dangers and peril and death in their desire for *liberty*, in their determination to build up the Dutch Republic in South Africa. And do you think it is possible for me to live as wife to one who shrinks from battle, and the sound of *roers* and the smell of powder?—to bear children—puny sons and chicken-hearted daughters—to a man who sat at his fireside when his country called for him in her hour of need? Never! Before my God! Never! never!!”

“Aletta! Aletta!” sobbed Johanna, “don’t talk so cruelly—so wickedly. Aren’t you ashamed? George is no coward.”

“Coward!” scoffed a harsh voice from the doorway, “By Jove! but you women are *rats*.”

Johanna quickly turned; her dark eyes, wet with tears, rested on Thane Brandon’s angry face and threatening, dark brows. He tramped into the room.

“Look here, Aletta, I’ve been listening to your heroics. Haven’t you talked enough? Give George a rest; he looks done up,” his heavy hand fell in brotherly fashion upon George’s shoulder as he pressed him into the big arm-chair. “Take it easy, old man; light up; we’ll have a pipe together. Never heed the missis. Women are never so happy as when deafening a man with their babble.”

But Aletta interposed her person between the brothers.

“You’ve been listening, have you, Thane?” she said hotly. “Then hear the end of my words. As surely as George does not go with the other Transvaal burghers to fight for our country and for our freedom, so surely as that God is above us, as that we talk together here in the home to which I came his bride and in which I have dwelt his faithful wife—so surely will I never more be wife to him, nor longer dwell by his side! There! you can take it or leave it as you please—the two of you—for I mean it . . . but whether I am forced to carry it out is for my husband to decide.”

With this parting shot, flung at poor George, she moved

into the bedroom and shut the door upon the three. In silence they heard her draw the bolt on the inside. Thane's face darkened; his thick, black eyebrows drew together frowningly.

"I think I must be getting home," Johanna said timidly, during a pause which followed upon a brief discussion by the brothers of some farm business, and the matter of the return of the farm-servants. "Mother will be anxious," she added, rising.

Thane, who had stooped to light a fresh pipe by tossing a live coal into the carefully scraped bowl, volunteered to see her safely on the way.

"But won't you sleep here?" George asked, hospitably. "The spare room is all ready."

She shook her head.

"They expect me back," she explained, lamely, and despite his pre-occupation her brother-in-law noted and wondered at the light and colour that enhanced the brilliance of her dark beauty. Thane, however, understood, and the signs were by no means displeasing to him.

"For God's sake, George, come down right properly on that wife of yours, if you want any peace or comfort! Don't shilly-shally, old chap, whatever you do! A man *must* be master in his own home or he had better be dead."

He gave this piece of brotherly advice, then, with a cheery good-night, followed Johanna from the room.

IX

THE girl, not waiting to hear Thane's emphatic exhortation as to the proper treatment of recalcitrant wives, stepped lightly along the rough track that led from the Top Farm by way of the stream at the foot of the hill to the home of her parents. But, Thane, with his long strides quickly overtook her. They walked in silence for a time. The young man's mind was occupied with his brother's trouble rather than with the girl by his side. In his own impetuous, overbearing fashion he loved her, but of her love for him he was abundantly assured. Therefore, the fulfilment of their affection could very well wait.

Johanna, of course, felt otherwise. Aletta's hardness, George's dilemma, were already pushed far into the background of her mind. Her blood was on fire with the mingled bliss, apprehension and hot determination that possessed her at the bare knowledge that she walked on a solitary path, in the dim, rich night under southern skies, alone with the man for the expression of whose love she was ready to risk a woman's all. That she would possess him at all costs, that by giving herself to him she would bind him to herself by the strongest of all ties, the girl had long determined. Deterred hitherto by Margery's watchfulness, baulked by Aletta's attitude, hindered in her fixed resolve by Thane's sudden and bitter fury against all of her nationality, Johanna had long awaited some such favourable opportunity as now presented itself. But, to her dismay she found her lover moody and

unresponsive, his whole being centred upon his brother's difficulties.

The contrast in looks which marked the outward build of the two sisters was abundantly emphasized in their characters and dispositions. They were the daughters of two conflicting types of people. Products of the Dutchmen who for fifty years defended themselves against Spain at the height of her power, they were as well of the ancestry of those inflexible French Huguenots who gave up home, fortune and country at the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, who voyaged to the Cape, and who for generations lived side by side with their Dutch neighbours on the shores of Table Bay. The result of this intermixture of races—combined with seven succeeding generations spent in constant warfare against savage surroundings, bloodthirsty barbarians, and ferocious wild beasts—has produced one of the most rugged, virile and unconquerable races ever seen upon earth, as well as one marked by the most emphatic contrasts in individual types.

Of the phlegmatic temper and resolute character of the Hollander, Aletta was a pure Dutch product; she was blond, she was faithful, she was obstinate—unmoved by threat, fanatical where her religion bade her serve, she worshipped the freedom of her country. She was a determinist of the true Boer type. Once she had accepted a view of conduct or principle, she adhered to it with inflexible tenacity of purpose. Scripture was, of course, her authority, and none but a godless unbeliever would seek to interpret otherwise its expressed commands. George Brandon she had known all her life; she had cared for him more than for her Dutch lover Bouwer, when the choice of a husband was before her. But she had long weighed the matter in her cautious mind before deciding upon marrying the man of British ancestry. Except for their descent, the men were alike Transvaalers, both educated by the same worthy pedagogue—the broken-down-gentleman *school-meester*—speaking both the *taal*

and English with equal fluency according to the surroundings of the moment. But, George Brandon—the gracious, pleasant young Englishman—was the chosen, and, once his wife, Aletta was his faithful wedded partner, devoted body and soul to his interests, proud that he should “get on” and become a man of farms and stock, and possessions and wealth. Nothing less than deliberate cowardice or disloyalty—as she reckoned it—to the flag of the Republic, on his part, could have created the present serious rupture between husband and wife. But a lofty contempt of danger where the freedom of her people was concerned, an intense loyalty to her country was, to this patriotic Boer woman, the very breath and essence of her existence. In the present crisis she stood firm as a rock embedded in the iron mould of her convictions. George should fight for his country if he were to continue to mate with her as master, husband and lover.

With Johanna, the quick, hot, Gallic blood in her veins over-rode at this crisis in her life all national and patriotic considerations that would otherwise have weighed with her as imperatively as with her sister. Against the British as a nation warring against her own people, she was as fiercely embittered as were the rest of her countrywomen. Love of liberty burned as hotly within her impassioned soul as within the bosom of any daughter of France who, in the stormy days of the Revolution, had tramped towards Versailles, singing the Marseillaise and shouting for the downfall of tyrant and oppressor. But, now, an individual passion had dulled that fervour of national aspiration, and Johanna had grown to look upon her love for Thane Brandon as a part of herself, high above all such minor considerations as patriotism, duty, conduct, or conventions. As a flood, impossible of resistance, it had overtaken her—almost unawares—and she had suddenly found herself carried, as it were, off her feet. For, unlike Aletta and George, she and Thane had never been on the friendliest of terms. As a child he had despised little girls; as a boy, was notably rude and quarrelsome when

in their company and, therefore, had been greatly disliked by the impulsive little Johanna. As a youth, he was inclined to snub the du Bruyn girls in common with all of their sex, and thus the coolness between himself and the younger sister continued until within the last two years, when the rumour of war brought Johanna—a tall, well-grown, handsome young woman—back from Pretoria, where she had been gaining a “finish” and “polish” among friends in the capital. Then it was that Thane, noting her ripe and radiant loveliness, grew interested and less bearish. He was, indeed, still disconcertingly abrupt, and even rude at times; but she had quickly fallen beneath the mastery of his manhood. He was essentially a masterful man; he had, in spite of his lack of gentleness, perhaps even because of it, awakened in the heart of Johanna a fierce, passionate devotion; a jealous, exacting love that threatened tragedy in some form or other. With fire such as this, however, he was not altogether disposed to refrain from meddling.

Along the rutty track, among the shadowed darkness of the bush that sprang in patches from out the hard red soil between the stony boulders of rock that lay to either side of the clearing, a night breeze wandered fitfully. The pebbles crunched beneath the weight of Thane's heavy tread. As they approached the foot of the hill and caught the murmur of the unresting stream, he pulled the pipe from between his lips to say: “Jo, I hope to God that canting sister of yours does not mean to play the damn fool with George!” then replaced it with a grip on the stem of his hard, white teeth that well-nigh split it in two.

Johanna felt that he awaited a reply. In her own mind she despaired of bringing Aletta to reason. Aloud, she said:

“Thane, you can't love me when you speak so horridly of Aletta.”

“Can't love you because I don't kneel down and make a milksop of myself,” he sneered, angrily. His heart full of fear on his brother's account, he spoke more roughly

than he otherwise would have done. With the quick intuition of a woman in love where her lover is concerned Johanna understood and forgave his brutal tone.

"I have done all I could—said all I could to influence Aletta," her voice was subdued. "But for me she would not now be with George. Yet you blame me——"

Touched by her tone, he stretched out a hand through the dimness around and caught her arm with a rough, comforting grasp.

"Don't get waxy, my girl; all this confounded tangle has stirred me up more than a bit, I can tell you. Jo, it's as plain as that two-and-two-make-four to those who have an ounce of common-sense: English fellows like George and myself *can't* get to shooting Britishers. That's a rank, damn, nonsensical way of talking; *we can't do it*. And no more can we go out shooting at our old chums and comrades—your father, Bouwer, and the rest of the boys in the district. See, then, there's but one thing for us to do in this business—to lie low, to clear out of the range of both Boer and Briton. 'This quest is not for me,' as Lancelot of the Lake has it—nor for George either. To get out of the way till the trouble's over, that's the game for us to play at. Isn't it so, old girl?"

Her heart spoke faintly on behalf of those countrymen of her own who, in the Colony and Natal, had gallantly thrown in their lot with Britain. Since they, as loyal subjects of the Empire under which the conditions of life had made them subjects, could do this thing why should it prove an impossibility to the English burghers of Oom Paul? She did not venture, however, to put the thought into words, fearful of drawing upon herself the tempest of fury that smouldered in the young man's breast.

"Thane," she faltered, "you ask me . . . a Dutch woman?"

He tossed aside her arm and strode ahead. She quickened her steps and caught his hand as he planted one firm step on the wooden bridge.

"I'm going home," he said, curtly.

"No, no!" she pleaded, breathing quickly. "Oh, Thane, you'll never leave me to go alone along the river—so dark as it is! Come just as far as the bend."

She had drawn him back from the bridge as she spoke and reluctantly, as it seemed, he allowed her to retain his hand. In this fashion they proceeded along the pathway through the rushes that bordered the banks of the hurrying stream.

Just where the big, flat boulder rose above the water they stopped. Far ahead of them from the bend in the hillside twinkled the lights in the homestead of du Bruyn's Rust, while directly across the stream the stronger lights shining steadily from the back premises of The Outspan beckoned to them.

"Thane! don't go! not just yet!" implored the distracted Johanna, feeling another wrench of the hand to which she clung. "I'll say whatever you like; no matter what you think or do, you know it makes no difference to me—to my love," she faltered.

"Love!" he growled in disgusted tones. "There's fighting, not love, to be faced, girl! There's treason and treachery, and bloodshed and hell before us. We're going into it sharp, the lot of us! Love!" his scorn was terrible. "Don't talk of love, Jo, till this confounded war is over and done with."

"And you or George shot and dead," she sobbed passionately. "Or, if alive, only to hate me and mine because of the hate that will be left between your people and mine. No, Thane, to-night decides things for us—for you and me—one way or the other"—her voice grew hard and steady. "*If you want me*, speak as a man speaks to the woman he wants—and take me, once and for all."

Thane drew back; her hand fell from his. He looked hard into her face. After a silence that to both man and girl appeared endless, he said hesitatingly:

"Jo . . . this business has upset you . . . you don't know what you are saying."

"Don't I?" she cried defiantly, and lifted her head

letting her black eyes blaze into his. "Don't I? Yes, I I do! I just do! Throw me aside now, and I am lost to you for ever."

"Don't rant, Jo," he said testily, for the idea of losing her altogether rankled, despite his determination. "I love you as a man loves the woman he means to mate, and if this damned war hadn't thrown a bomb between us and between our people we should have been married by this time. But, my girl, we can't shut our eyes to the fact that hell has been stirred up between your people and mine. How is that devil Aletta going to act? She can ruin George—yes, bring ruin and misery upon him, and misery to us; and if she does it, so help me God! but I'll never take to wife one of her race and breed! I'll swear to that!"

Johanna stood as though turned to stone, horrified by his words and tone. But in another moment her courage returned to her. Nature bade her be bold, bade her forget the part accorded by the dictates of centuries of civilization and convention as proper to her sex. If Thane escaped from her this night a free man she had no bond wherewith in the future to hold him.

But would he play his part? Nature whispered to her of the old enticement—the bait of all ages and times by which a man is ever snared.

"Where would you and George go into hiding?" she asked sympathetically, pressing to his side. "I'll do my best with Aletta, dear."

Her eyes shone like dark, slumbrous pools from out the whiteness of her face. What man, looking into them, could remain unmoved by the sense of their loveliness? Not the quick-tempered young giant who, having looked, felt the vehement leap of his own fiery pulses.

"Jo, I can trust you, I know . . . but better for you to know nothing of our plans. . . . Aletta would worm them out of you."

"Thane—when a Dutch girl loves—all the rest of the world is as nothing then."

"I'll whisper it in your ear, sweetheart, before we slip away . . . *if only George will come.*"

"He must, he must!" Her heart beat with violent relief at the possibility of victory. "Promise me"—she clung to him, her white face close to his, her dark, slumbrous eyes holding his gaze—"promise me you won't go without telling me . . . Thane! Thane!"

He took her in his arms—reluctantly at first, then with sudden passion. She trembled and cowered beneath the rough grasp that placed her upon his broad breast, beneath the scorching kisses he pressed upon her burning, tear-stained face, upon her eyes and hair. But they awoke within her a greater recklessness, a more vehement disregard as to usage and custom. Indifferent to all else, she lay passive within his arms.

"It's hard to give you up," Thane breathed, with low intensity. "Don't tempt me over-much, Jo . . . the blood in my veins runs hot and swift . . . I might love and then murder you!"

She laughed, a low ripple of content.

"Come, girl . . . aren't you afraid of a brute of an Englishman?" he mocked. Then his tone changed: "Come, love; see here, sweetheart, let us rest a bit . . . here, on this patch of moss and dried grass under the old mimosa . . . it'll make a cosy nest."

"How plainly we can hear the water gurgling and lapping over the stones," sighed Johanna in low, faint tones of happiness, surrendering herself with shy womanliness—now that victory was hers—to his renewed embrace.

From out of the darkness of the nest under the branching mimosa, heavy with the scent of its golden balls, Thane's voice rang hollow:

"—and falling into the bottomless pool where George sank the day he fought Singula for me."

"And we can still see the light from your home," breathed the girl, holding back with an effort the overmastering flood of passion that had taken forcible posses-

sion of her and threatened danger to the success of her venture. "See—there."

It was an unlucky allusion.

"*Margery*," Thane groaned, "waiting up for me, to hear news of George," and he hated himself for holding Aletta's sister in his arms.

His bitter, implacable anger would not let him hold her ; yet with all the fierceness of his manhood he resented the temper which constrained him to leave her.

"See, there is a light moving about outside your place," he said huskily, and the change in his voice instantly alarmed Johanna. "Your father looking out for you, I expect—better get on, little woman ; eh ?"

With what right word might she still hold him ? With what wrong word might she not drive him from her ? Terrified, despairing, determined, she said quickly :

"He'll only be going to the stables to give the horses a last feed." Her arms crept closer around the strong, bare throat and neck escaping her grasp. "Oh," she stammered incoherently, "never mind that . . . what does it matter ? . . . I mean—so long as we have one another . . ." Then, as he felt the tears on her cheeks maddening him as he hardened his heart against her final appeal, she whispered sobbingly : "Sorrow is coming . . . and parting . . . and misery . . . *but we are together now . . .*"

Through the darkness she sensed the awful emptiness around.

X

WHEN Thane Brandon, some few minutes later, entered the house, he found Margery awaiting his news.

She was sitting before the ashes of an expiring fire, a basket of stockings on the table drawn up to the hearth, a partly-darned, hand-knitted sock held over her left hand for more searching inspection as to its wholeness.

The low-ceiled, oblong apartment in which she sat—the same in which Woodward had taken his repast—overlooked the garden and river, and from its windows were obtainable a wide view of the mountain-side, with the Top Farm homestead nestling on the half-way plateau and the lofty peak of World's View towering overhead.

Through the windows on this particular evening a clear ray of light had penetrated right away to the cosy nest under the old mimosa on the opposite side of the stream. Had Margery with intent raised the blinds?—her brother questioned suspiciously.

Her face paled as in a few strong words he told the tale of Aletta's uncompromising attitude.

"Surely she can't expect George to fight against the English?" she asked, impatiently.

"But that's just what she does expect—and demand, too, in the voice of a tiger-cat," Thane growled angrily, helping himself more liberally than was his wont from the brandy decanter on the sideboard. "Expect reason from a bally billy-goat rather than from her. There's but one

thing for George and me," he added emphatically, "and that is to be out of the way when the call comes."

"There's Wyman's," breathed Margery.

"You've hit it first shot," her brother replied; "the very spot I've selected. There's only the old man left since the rest trekked to Pretoria, and he's bent double with the rheumatism. The Boers won't come messing round there."

"And those caves just behind the farmhouse," Margery suggested; "you and George could live there for weeks and no one the wiser."

Thane nodded.

"We must start to-morrow carting provisions over on the quiet. If only George will see it as we do," he concluded irritably.

"George must," his sister said, with conviction in her tones to hide the sinking at her heart.

"Mum's the word, Margery." Thane rose from his seat on the edge of the table as he spoke. "Don't let the kid guess."

"Babs is safe; but, Thane, listen: don't breathe a word to Jo."

Her brother's colour rose.

"Of course not—let a Boer into the secret and what chance would there be of hiding from 'em?"

"But, Thane . . . you are so indiscreet . . . I am often worried over it . . . it frightens me . . . that girl is simply off her head about you, and yet you encourage her in her folly; you do, you know you do."

"Don't you worry; I'll never make a fool of myself over any girl"—conscious pride was in his tone. "And don't talk to me of Boer women, I'm about fed up with one of 'em to-night—all this trouble and bother come to poor old George—damn the lot of 'em!"

He strode across the room, yawning.

"Heigho! I'm dead beat; I must get some sleep." He turned at the door. "I say, where has the old man put the Australian chap?"

"Next door to you ; don't disturb him if you can help ; he went to bed just after his supper."

Thane stood apparently considering.

"Old Jonas carried some supper to his room," Margery continued, packing together the socks and pressing them into the basket. "He sent in word that he was tired, and would we excuse his remaining in his room."

"Then you haven't seen him since he was brought back ?" her brother inquired carelessly.

Margery said : "No ; no one but Jonas has seen him since father showed him where he was to doss down."

"Poor chap ! It was rough luck being nabbed by that *schelm* of a Bouwer—an Australian, too."

"He's not," Margery contradicted calmly ; "he told father he was born and brought up in England . . . only went out sheep-farming to Australia three years ago."

"Oh," said Thane sleepily, and then turned once more to leave the room.

"Thane," said his sister seriously, and at that warning note in her voice he again swung round impatiently. "Thane, you'll bring ruin on George and yourself if you don't shake off Johanna. She'll turn one of these days, out of revenge, upon you both."

"What can she do ?" he questioned, evasively.

"What *can't* she do ? You had better ask yourself that," his sister returned, severely.

Thane was understood to damn the women as he retreated from the room and went off to bed.

Margery raked out the ashes, extinguished the lamp and felt her way into the passage. Bolting the door at the end, through which her brother had just passed and which opened out on to the front of the house, she returned to where an inner door led from the narrow hall into her own bedroom. Softly closing the door behind her, she glanced towards the bed in the corner upon which the moon, through the unshuttered window opposite, threw its light. Babs lay sleeping, curled among the pillows. Margery passed on and stood at the window.

From this position she could directly overlook the row of outhouses to right and left of the main building ; she could single out Thane's bedroom, opening, as did all the rooms, into the front yard ; could see the closed door of the adjoining apartment—number six—the room given over to the use of the stranger who that day had been introduced into her life.

"I rather liked his manner," she reflected. "But why was I so short with the poor fellow?" she asked herself, and thought she might have been a trifle more sympathetic. He had come off a long, lonely, dangerous ride. An equally perilous journey lay before him. "And I said nothing kind or encouraging," she thought. Then recollected her weariness and the terrible pots and pans. "No wonder I forgot ; I was dead beat, as Thane would say ; I'll do the polite to-morrow—if I get time."

She pushed open the casement window, leaned out and drew together the wooden shutters. Rover, the big black retriever, looked up into her face inquiringly from where he lay thumping his tail, as she bent over the sill with a low "Good old boy." Then she drew herself back into the darkened room, and throwing off her clothes sat on the side of the bed thinking of George and his terrible position.

"Of course it would not be terrible at all if only he were not so conscientious—if only he were *adaptable*, like others—bringing his conscience into easy conformity with the dictates of policy." . . . But George had never been one of those happy-go-lucky individuals, and amidst all her anxiety and apprehension on his account his sister felt she would not have had him otherwise.

She had slept uneasily, her hand in the child's, when she woke with a start of fear. Rover was growling disapprovingly, and through the chinks of the shutters was borne to her listening ears an indistinct, murmuring sound. Raising herself quickly, she groped her way to the window and pushed back the shutters. At intervals the sound was repeated. Barefooted, a shawl over her

nightdress, she clambered over the low, broad sill and stood in the yard. Rover ran up and nestled against her fawningly. She laid a restraining hand on his head. Some enemy it might be, inimical to the welfare of her brothers, lurking in the darkness. She would best whoever sought to do them harm.

She crept to Thane's door, intending to warn him. But with her hand on the knob she paused. She grew astonished—enraged. Her brows contracted menacingly above her white face and set lips. An enemy indeed, yet not of the kind she had feared. The sound had resolved itself into a low cry repeated at intervals: "*Thane . . . Thane . . . unlatch your shutters . . . I must speak to you. . . .*"

So *that* was it. Jo—the little fiend—in the garden!

The single window of each little room in the row opened on to the garden. The voice came from the garden, from someone in the garden who had stolen up the pathway from the river. Clearly it was a woman's voice repeating that urgent petition. Margery sickened and grew faint. Into what terrible straits might Thane's wicked indiscretion not land the lot of them?

She heard her brother moving at last . . . the bed creaked . . . then his voice came thickly: "Who the devil is it?" . . . Then a whisper and a fierce retort: "Are you *mad*?" . . . then a louder explanation from the garden:

"I've come to warn you . . . Bower is round at home plotting to get George . . . Do you want to save him?—'No,' do you say? Oh, I thought it wouldn't be 'No' with you if George were in it . . . then open . . . quick!"

Margery waited for no more. To reach the garden the very speediest route was by way of a bedroom, using the window as an exit. Forgetful, in her excitement, of the fact that to Captain Philip Woodward had been allotted the room adjoining Thane's, she incontinently bolted into number six, and made for the back window.

Aroused by the noise of the door flung violently open, the captain sat up in bed wondering if he had come across one of those Transvaal earthquakes of which report had made mention. He gazed with sleepy surprise at the figure of a flying witch—as it appeared to him—her whiteness cloaked by a dark shawl, who flitted the length of the room and disappeared as by magic through a blank wall into the night. Then, as he heard the noise of shutters banged loudly together, he fell back on his pillow, and piecing the evidence bit by bit arrived at the bare outstanding fact of the unwonted intrusion upon his privacy.

“Most remarkable lot I’ve ever been landed among,” he soliloquized; and in order to be prepared for any fresh developments that might arise he deemed it prudent to leave his bed and get into his khaki, which he did grumblingly.

From the garden came muffled voices—a sound of sharp remonstrance, reproaches, sobs—then a man’s deep bass.

Margery, meanwhile, had fallen lion-like upon the miserable Johanna. A second time had her plans been frustrated and the Boer girl stood inwardly raging. Yet she held to her purpose and lied masterfully.

“I come—all this way in the cold and dark—just to save your brothers; and you—you—my friend—you who have known me all my life—you accuse me of such scandalous conduct!” she cried, assuming an air of great indignation.

But the English girl knew her Dutch sister. She dragged the unlucky Jo down the garden, half-way to the bridge before she stopped.

“Jo, listen!” she shook her arm, “listen!” she commanded imperatively, “it’s not whether we’re friends or care for each other, or anything so small as that. It’s life and death, Jo! You let Thane alone! He can’t fool about love-making now! *War’s* here, Jo!—bitter war between your people and mine! *War*, Jo—not love and softness and kisses and happiness, but terrible misery,

lifelong sorrow for us—for your home or for mine, God knows! Jo, dear, go home . . . forget him . . . let him have a chance—let my brothers have a chance to get through this business without any more complications. Isn't Aletta bad enough—the way she has been treating George? Yes, I know you can't help what she does; but, Jo, don't you come making matters worse; you leave Thane alone and I promise you—I swear to you—that when peace comes—if George and he are unharmed—I'll help you to him. . . Yes, Jo . . . go away, now . . . and I will."

"You can't," Johanna said, stubbornly. "Thane will never marry me *then*; the bitterness will be too great *then*. Yes, it will, for years and years between your people and mine. . . . If Thane turns from me this night he is lost to me for ever."

- "For shame, Jo! You—a proud du Bruyn—to stoop so low to win a man!"

"We can't stoop lower than Nature, Margery; and it is only when we stoop to her level that she can lift us as high as heaven."

"There's only trouble can come of this heaven of yours, Jo—bitter trouble to all of us. Don't be selfish . . . come, now, I'll take you home."

"It's no time for you to be wandering about, Margery," Thane's voice came gruffly out of the dimness. He had dressed himself, had stepped through the window, followed the girls and had heard Johanna's bitter confession. There was no littleness in his nature. He would have scorned to dishonour the daughter of the race against whom he was now at enmity. He would have disdained to have revenged Aletta's treatment of George by the humiliation of her sister. Stormy and passionate as was his nature, there was in it the bigness of these vast, elemental forces. But he was human and his pulses bounded hotly on hearing Johanna's cry for himself, partly as it affected his own passion for her, but chiefly because of his brother's safety. Johanna in possession of any plot

against George's peace of mind was a valuable ally. In this capacity he resolved to employ her. He swore to drag the truth from her. If she insisted upon her own terms as the price he must pay, so much the worse for her: "I'll take Jo home," he added, shortly.

"No, Thane, you will not," Margery protested with quick vehemence; but he drew her to one side, pulling her clinging arms from their grasp of Johanna's slim waist.

"Go in, Margery; my word, you've nothing on!" lowering his tone he added impatiently into her ear: "I must find out what that infernal Bower is hatching against George and me."

"Jo will tell me," Margery cried, imploringly; "yes, Jo, you will."

"Indeed, I'll not—I don't trust your promises—liars that you English are!" Johanna retorted stormily; "I'll tell no one but Thane—and I'll not tell him while you stand by. . . . No, indeed, I won't be befooled by the lot of you—traitors, one and all," saying which she disappeared down the pathway.

They listened to the padding footsteps crossing the log-bridge. Then Thane started and moved to follow.

"Thane, you must not . . . the danger . . . don't you see it?"

But he shook off her grasp so roughly in his absorption of purpose that Margery reeled and staggered with some force against the rough bark of the tall eucalyptus beneath which they had been standing. She fell to the ground with bruised forehead and a cut hand. With an angry word she picked herself up, but Thane was nowhere to be seen.

XI

SHE leaned for several moments against the broad trunk that had dealt her so unfriendly a blow—hurt physically and mentally, conscious only of intense misery.

Dizzy and chilled to the bone, she groped her way back to the open window and, climbing through the aperture into Thane's bedroom, regained the front yard. Breathless, with still an occasional heavy gasp, she sank upon a bench that stood fixed against the outbuildings, bending forward in a crouching position and putting her cut hand to her bruised forehead, the result being a ghastly patch on the white face.

Captain Woodward, who, in his dilemma, had been strolling around the front premises escorted by the watchful Rover, now deemed the time for explanations had arrived. In stockinged feet he approached the unconscious Margery.

"Can I be of any assistance?"

The sound of a human voice startled her and she sprang to her feet in a thrill of terror. He noticed they were bare and shapely, and gleamed like polished ivory beneath the dangling ends of the woollen shawl.

"Who are you?" she demanded sharply, her face lifted to his as she studied it searchingly through the faint grey light that heralded the approach of the dawn.

"You forget," he said quietly, noting the ugly bruise and the smear of crimson on the white face. "I am your father's guest—the Boer prisoner. But——"

"Oh, I remember——" she sank back on the bench. 'How idiotic of me!' she muttered. "We must have disturbed you," she faltered. Her face suddenly grew crimson. "Oh—surely—I must have rushed through your room! I quite forgot anyone had been put in there! Why didn't you bolt the door on the inside? Oh, I am sorry! What must you have thought of me?"

"It matters nothing—not in the very least," Woodward hastened to assure her. "You were in haste—in trouble. Believe me, Miss Brandon, I am only concerned to see that you are hurt—and cold, too." He caught her shiver and low, bitter sigh. "Come, let me help you back to the house."

Recollecting she must needs use her bedroom window to effect an entrance to the house, Margery shook her head as she rose wearily to her feet.

"No, thanks; but there's really no need; I can manage." With what dignity she could muster she drew her drapery round her tall figure. "I beg of you to forget all you may have heard," she said in the low, musical tones that had so strongly haunted his imagination.

"I have heard nothing," Woodward replied simply, but the plain words and quiet tone reassured her.

"Thank you—I am so sorry you were disturbed. Go in, now, and try to get some sleep before morning," she called back over her shoulder as she moved slowly across the yard. Some instinct told him she wished to regain the house in a manner peculiar to herself, and he turned and re-entered his bedroom against the impulse that bade him watch her chamber through the open window that faced them. Instead, he resolutely stretched himself out upon his neglected couch obedient to her slightly-expressed wish.

"And yesterday morning I had never seen her! . . . but life is queer . . ." he soliloquized. "Queer doings here, too, it seems," he reflected, falling into a dreamy train of thought; "primitive folk . . . prefer windows

apparently to doors as natural exits . . . but they are the true Colonial breed—grit all through—she's a fine, brave girl be she never such a drudge . . . stood to save that devil-may-care fellow from some scrape or other, I'll bet a bob . . . she's worth a round dozen of such as he . . .”

The reflection that he would see her on the morrow followed him into dreamland, stealing across his senses like the shadowy presence of some indefinable good.

BOOK TWO

I

THE Boer *predikant*, clad in rusty black—a knapsack over his shoulder, his *roer* in his hand, a well-stocked cartridge-belt clasp ing his portly middle—rode up to the door of the Top Farm.

Aletta sat on the stoep slicing pumpkin for the mid-day meal. The creepers, overhanging the trellis-work of the verandah, and climbing in a thick network of tangled growth to the eaves of the corrugated iron roof, hid her at first from sight of the reverend gentleman.

Nevertheless, he threw his bridle-reins over the head of his rough-coated, stoutly-built pony and dismounting, grunted with evident understanding to the stunted, pot-bellied young native who appeared suddenly at his heels, for that youth with a ferocious grin, meant doubtless as a pleasantry, immediately seized upon the animal and without further parley led it to the stables.

Pastor van der Merwe conversed on general topics during the first half-hour of the visit. Over his coffee and rusks he discussed the promising spring rains, so welcome to the farmers, and incidentally praised Aletta's light biscuits, which praise she received with the expressionless countenance demanded by the etiquette of her people.

But the coffee-drinking over and the pipe set going, his demeanour changed to solemnity as he inquired in a serious voice :

“How is it with your husband, daughter? My visit is

a business affair. Alas! in these evil times *onze kerk* must needs join hands with *onze land*. I am going from farmhouse to farmhouse among my people, spurring on our men to their duty of keeping off the godless hosts of the enemy from sweeping across the Northern Transvaal, bringing pillage and fire and death upon our homes, our wives and our little ones. I am encouraging our women to be in no way behind-hand in urging upon every man and boy among us who can handle a rifle to fall in with our commando, and help drive back the Irregulars to the boats from which they were landed to do their devil's work on this unhappy land."

"You are right, Mynheer," Aletta said with enthusiasm. "Indeed, it is as you say." She had heard of the visitation round the district of the energetic van der Merwe and was prepared to welcome his assistance in the task of persuading George to his duty of joining the burgher forces. "The men left about here are sluggish—very sluggish," she went on. "We are over-ridden by these Irregulars, hanging all along our border as their base of operations. Why! they are here, there, and everywhere—may be upon us any day, for The Outspan would be such a convenient strong hold for them—yet, to their shame, the men left hereabouts won't lift a finger to resist their on-coming."

"But, indeed, they shall," van der Merwe replied after a pause, pulling his pipe from between his thickly-bearded lips. "*Heer!* they shall if I've got to *sjambok* them up to the scratch! That is what I am here for. De Villiers is helping to shepherd them from the lower farms, and when we've got them together in camp on Louw's Krantz we'll make a combined move and clear the bushveldt of these *verdoemd* Colonists."

"If only they were a British regiment!" sighed Aletta, regretfully, "we should very soon trap them—the poor, foot-sore, veldt-sore *jonges*. But these devils from Australia and the Kaap are just as tough as we Boers—good shots, good riders, and know how to ambush as

well as we do; they'll cop our burghers if these don't exercise slimness."

"*Duivels* they are, and care not for God nor man; they know how to play all our games; yet to trap them, so far, we cannot. But we'll hang on to them and harass them, nevertheless. That *verdoemd kapetein* of theirs shall not have the honour of clearing the bushveldt for England."

Aletta threw back her head and shrilled disdainfully:

"I've heard, with my own ears, the men in the bar telling the tale of that fierce, wild spirit. 'Is he devil or man?' they ask, and tell how he has sworn an oath by all that he holds sacred that let but the British Commander-in-Chief give him a free hand and he'll bring every Boer in the Northern Transvaal to heel."

"Ha! Ha! He boasts, does he?" said the *predikant* grimly. "He has done good work for England, nevertheless—so foolish are the *rooineks*—nought but evil will come to him of it."

Again Aletta laughed shrilly.

"My word! Mynheer, imagine *us* punishing a man who got the better of our enemies in battle!—who cleared our bushveldt for us!"

"It is the Almighty who fighteth for us. He has blinded the eyes of the *Kapeteins* and Generals so that the *rooineks* be delivered into our hands," van der Merwe remarked with pious unction. "*Maar* this man—a devil at fighting—is still at large on our borders, and able to do us mischief; therefore we must get our men together and tackle his crowd before they get to The Outspan."

"I shall tell George what you propose to do, Mynheer," Aletta said gravely; "he is down at the lands just now. . . But, Mynheer," she added with a sigh, "I am sorry I cannot promise for him to join you."

"Impossible!" cried the *predikant*, while his eyes, twinkling out of a mass of fat creases, gazed upon her in the greatest astonishment. "Impossible! Would *you* hold back your husband, my daughter? That I never

will credit of one of the bravest and most patriotic/ among our women ! ”

“ I—hold him back ! ” scoffed Aletta. “ Why, Mynheer, I have tried every plan known to woman to bring a husband to reason ! I’ve coaxed, threatened, wept, entreated, prayed—but George does not see it—not as we do, *Oom*—it’s just the cursed *Engelsch* blood in his veins, I suppose.”

“ Blood creeps where it cannot walk, that is certainly true,” agreed van der Merwe, complacently. “ But tell me this : Was he born in the Transvaal or no ? ‘ Yes,’ then there you have it : the Transvaal is his *land* and he must defend her, as must all her true-born sons in this her hour of peril.”

“ How clearly you put it, Mynheer ! How beautifully ! —just like the Book itself ! Ach ! then—if George did but see it as you and I do he would break through the ties that hold him back—*his family*, Mynheer—for my husband is one of the most conscientious and honourable of men.”

She paused, looking eagerly at van der Merwe for help or inspiration in the difficulty thus presenting itself.

“ You mean, daughter, that if he saw it to be his duty to fight, then he would join our burghers ? ” the *predikant* asked, thoughtfully.

“ Yes, Mynheer, that is how it is with my husband ; he won’t be frightened, or goaded, or forced into joining our men, but he may be reasoned into it.”

“ Then I must go to the lands and reason with him,” van der Merwe said, rising ; and picking up his *roer* he shouted to the stable boy to bring round his pony.

“ I will go with you, Mynheer,” Aletta volunteered as she swept her apron-ful of pumpkin peels and pips into an old bucket by her side, and tied on her blue print sun-bonnet. “ But I will not go further than the first ploughed field,” she added ; “ I will sit there, behind the thorn-bushes, so that George may not see me, and perchance harden his heart.”

The two talked briskly as they made their way along the rough wagon-track that led to the lands, where the work of turning over the soil for the spring crops was proceeding apace.

"There goes my husband—walking along after that plough in the third field from this," said Aletta, after halting for a pause where a gate in the barbed-wire fencing opened into the lands; she stood shielding her eyes from the rays of the sun, then pointed again:

"There—do you see, Mynheer?"

"*Ja, ja.* Remain here, my daughter, I will return and give you news," replied van der Merwe, and he tramped off briskly, skirting the freshly-turned mould.

Aletta sank to the ground, the thick clump of the stunted bush shielded her from the chill wind, the sun warmed her pleasantly. She lay on her side, her elbow dug into the loose red soil, her chin resting on her sun-browned knuckles. She wondered what would be the result of the pastor's errand. What would come of it? she asked herself. Would George be won over to see that it was his positive duty to help drive back the invaders? If so, God be thanked! If *not*—well, it meant everything to her! For she had vowed her vow, and her life with the man she loved was finished and over for ever did he refuse to join the burgher forces. It meant everything to her, for she loved him—yet, as she told herself with a burst of fierce fanaticism, she loved her country better.

II

MEANWHILE the portly van der Merwe strode gallantly onward, honestly anxious to bring to George Brandon a sense of his duty to the beloved mother-country.

"The *predikant*, baas," said Zimbene, the native boy, now grown to manhood and holding the proud position of driver of a team; and George, looking round, recognized the visitor. His heart sank a little within him as he grew conscious of what the visit portended. He, too, had heard rumours of van der Merwe's activities among the Boer farmers of the district. "It's Aletta and her people have set him upon me; as though I don't feel worried enough as it is," he thought, with some natural irritation.

But it was against his honest, generous nature to bear malice; and he greeted the pastor with the sincere heartiness he was wont to accord to so old a friend of the family.

"I am on the Lord's business," van der Merwe broke in upon the welcome without any preliminary skirmishings. "He has sent me to call you, my son," added the old man, still grasping George's hand within his own. "His message to Transvaalers is: 'The enemies of the Lord shall be delivered into your hands! neck and heel shall ye trample upon their slain.' And so we shall," he concluded, falling into his every-day tones, "so we shall, Brandon, let us but unite in the work of driving back these jingoes from off our borders."

"Mynheer, I fear you are too hopeful; England is behind these jingoes, you must remember. This time it's Joe

Chamberlain, not Gladstone, who's holding the reins over there : Britain will never let go her grip on the Transvaal, or hand it back to us ; we have lost our Republic."

The old man "pished" and spat. The allusion to the temper of the British Government galled him. The loss of the freedom of his country appalled him. He refused to contemplate so overwhelming a disaster.

"Do not be too readily cast down," he answered after a pause. "If we each in our own district unite to repel the invaders, it may be that help will come to us. Nothing is impossible to the Lord. We must have faith. Certain it is that the greater our resistance, the sooner will Britain come to terms ; the likelier will our brethren under the golden eagle, or the *vierkleur*, be moved by admiration of our valorous deeds to send help to us from across the ocean."

George's only reply was a faint smile and motion of negation, but van der Merwe, unheeding the gesture, continued eagerly to voice his mission.

"My son, you are a burgher of our beloved Republic and in her need you will never refuse to handle a *roer* on her behalf—nay, nor to give your life itself, if need be—as every *oprecht* man must certainly be willing to do. I say, you will give the needed help," he added, holding out a hand to check George's attempted interruption—"for I baptized you when an infant in the arms of that saintly mother now gone to her reward ; I watched your growth through boyhood, and it was these lips that instructed you in the catechism and pronounced you a son of our *kerk* ! More, Mynheer, I rejoiced that so honest and brave a young *kerel* should wed with the lion-hearted daughter of my oldest friend Jan du Bruyn, on the day that I made you and Aletta man and wife. My son, you will never disappoint an old man who believes the very highest of you. It lies in your power to do your country an immense service, for you can be my right hand in this business of the great drive that shall sweep our enemies back to the sea."

"You have been a kind, good friend to us all; we English here about know no other pastor or teacher but you, Mynheer," began George, but van der Merwe interposed as in amaze:

"*Engelsch! Engelsch!* I know no *Engelsch* or Dutch in my flock; only *Transvaalers*, my son, who will help defend the Transvaal."

"I see only a divided duty, Mynheer," said George, suddenly resolved in his determination to accept advice from this the only spiritual father he had ever known. "There is my heart and my conscience insistently urging me to my duty of joining our burghers; while, on the other hand, my whole soul and mind and spirit revolts at the idea of fighting my blood-brothers."

"'Blood creeps where it cannot walk,' as the Boer proverb runs," assented the *predikant*, nodding his grizzled head; "but that feeling you must set aside; a man cannot serve two masters, as the Book saith."

"I cannot set it aside," said George, hotly. "Blood will not be thus easily dismissed; my father, my brother, my sister—these are one with me, one with our foes; and that is the naked truth, cloak it as you may. I owe it to my country to defend it from invasion; yet at the same time I may not war against its invaders. That is the riddle. Solve it, if it lies in your power as an honest man so to do, and I will welcome your solution; for, indeed, Mynheer, I find myself confused as to my right course in this business, and so I frankly own to you."

For some moments van der Merwe smoked in silence, his eyes fixed on the ground, the point of his thick *veldschoen* prodding at the loosened soil. Then he raised his head and faced George, who towered above him, his hands thrust in his pockets, his deep-set blue eyes alight with emotion and intensity of feeling as he voiced the terrible position in which he found himself placed.

The *predikant* spoke with conviction.

"I am a Boer, and a Transvaaler, and the British are the invaders of *onze land*; nevertheless I can respect

your scruples—the scruples a man as honest and courageous as yourself must certainly feel in this lamentable affair. Yet listen, my son, and I will point out to you *the middle road*, which is the road Heaven means you to take. Cast in your lot with us, fearing not at all that the blood of your blood-brothers will be required at your hands, since I, who am practically head of the commando, shall respect those scruples in a practical way.”

He paused, while George, with eyes still fixed intently upon him, said not a word. Presently, he continued :

“ Our object in getting together these bushveldt burghers is, as you are aware, for the sole purpose of checking the Irregulars on our border. Let us but keep them, until Peace is arranged, from making one of those devilish drives across the Northern Transvaal, such as they have elsewhere so successfully accomplished, and we ask no more. Only to keep them off *Northern Transvaal soil*. Now in order to do this, we need merely to harass them, to trap them, to ambush them, and they will keep on the Rhodesian side of the border. There need be no fighting at all—no big battle, for, indeed, we must never let it come to that. No, no ; just to harry and hustle them, and keep them at their proper distance so that when our Generals down south have come to terms we may be found an unconquered people—our *roers* in our hands.”

That was the dream of every Northern Transvaaler. George knew, and nodded, his calm blue eyes now enthusiastic as were the little twinkling orbs of the soldier-predikant.

“ Join us in this noble attempt, my son ; I give you my word, you shall never be called upon to fire a shot at your kin. Only join us, and help with the cattle and commissariat. You can be of the greatest help to me and our *Commandant*—old Piet Koetzee—in arranging the transport, and working out our marches and numbers and so forth, being a man of sense and education as you are, my son ; for the men in this part are ignorant as baboons, most of them, no good at all except at shooting straight

and riding far and fast—and, thank the good Lord, that they *can* do.”

George welcomed this possible solution of the tangle—a middle road which he might possibly consider. His joining the Boer forces gathered in van der Merwe’s commando—if but for a few weeks—would appease Aletta. It would, in a sense, satisfy his own conscience. He would feel he was doing his share as a burgher in the defence of hearth and home, in holding an invading force at bay, if only by attending to those necessary details which fall to the lot of the non-fighters. Still, there remained to trouble him the thought of his father’s bitter disappointment at his decision; of his sister’s heavy sorrow and cruel suspense during his absence at the front; of Thane’s fierce anger, and of the consequences of that anger upon his impatient, iron-willed nature. What could compensate to these beloved ones, so dear to him, for such cruel suffering as he would be inflicting on them, George Brandon now asked himself, and there was a cloud on his fair face as he replied to the eagerly-expectant *predikant*:

“Mynheer, you have pointed out the middle path and I thank you for so doing. Whether I can take it remains to be seen. I will think it over, consult my own people, and if possible——”

“You will take it—you will join us next week. We meet at Louw’s Krantz, there to form camp as our base of operations. De Villiers and his lot join the men I am collecting, and if all we hear is true there will be a couple of hundred of our bushveldt farmers—brave fellows all—keen trackers, good marksmen, the pick of our burghers. Let us but get together and these godless Irregulars will never dare attempt that drive across our *land* of which we hear rumour.”

“The Irregulars will dare much, Mynheer. They have *men* for leaders, officers who will stop at nothing, men who have lived all their lives in bush country and can ride far and shoot straight with the best of our burghers—make no mistake about that.”

"But these men—it is true they fear neither devil nor man, and are up in bush-craft and guerilla fighting—but have they the free hand, Brandon."

"They *take* it—not stopping for orders at times," George said, dryly.

"As when that *kaptein* of theirs—that wild, revengeful soul—shot down the Boer prisoners, not sparing even the wounded nor the minister of the Lord," van der Merwe replied with some heat in his tones.

But George's blue eyes never wavered, and the *predikant* shrank a little under their keen, honest gaze.

"*Mynheer knows the reason*," was all the young man said.

"I do—indeed I do," van der Merwe replied heartily, forced against his will, by the simple but unmistakable sincerity of George Brandon's look and tone, into a true confession of his own particular sentiments in this matter. "The Australian is a brave man, who dare deny it? It was a 'tit-for-tat' as you *Engelsch* say. His friend was—well, let us say led into a trap—"

"*Murdered*," interrupted George in slow, firm tones. "Man to man, as we talk together as honest men, let us call things by their right names. His friend was deceived by the Boers—rode unsuspectingly into their arms—and then was shot down in cold blood."

"Soh," admitted van der Merwe cautiously, "then came the sequel; and the man, risking his own life—for I am told a court-martial awaits him—avenged his friend! Well, we Boers respect courage, bravery, contempt of life above all things. To us these are the highest of all virtues, for only by the exercise of dauntless courage did our fathers win for themselves and for us this free Republic; therefore we Transvaalers above all others know how to appreciate this man's fierce yet brave act of vengeance upon the mur-trappers of his friend, and the man himself commands our respect."

"Say 'justice' instead of 'vengeance' and you've got it quite right, *Mynheer*," George said in kindly tones, for

his heart warmed to old van der Merwe for his manly confession of the truth concerning this—one of those sad incidents for which war alone is ever responsible. "We South Africans know war is a cruel, bitter thing, because it touches our doorposts and enters our doorways, and so we have the sense to recognize that it cannot be carried on 'in kid gloves' as they say."

"That is one of those *verdoemd* stupid theories the British soldier gets a grip of and seems unable to let go," rejoined the Dutchman. "But war's here—upon us—as you say, my son, therefore let us each as God-fearing men take our share in the task before us; mine—as a man of the *kerk*—is simply to organize, plan, arrange. And you will be my right hand in this work—no fighting for you nor for me—our *heads* will work for *onze land*." He grasped George's hand in farewell as he spoke with unusual enthusiasm, "Yes, our heads will work, so that with wisdom and the force of our *roers* combined, we may hold off the invaders from setting foot in the Northern Transvaal until Peace comes."

"May it come soon—the sooner the better for us," George replied, but his tones were not very hopeful.

"—and on our own terms. The *Engelsch*, God be praised, are ever foolish in throwing away that for which their bravest and most valiant sons have shed their blood," added van der Merwe, as he turned in the direction of his horse which the stable-boy now led to within a few yards of the spot where the men conversed together. "Farewell, my son, and I shall look for you early next week—at Louw's Krantz, where we camp," he concluded, as he climbed into the saddle, and so departed at a slow jog-trot along the ploughed fields and towards the next farmstead, stopping only by the way to report to the expectant Aletta of his success.

III

AS he jogged along down the bridle-path that led to the foot of the mountain, elated with the result of his morning's work, the extravagant thanks of the jubilant Aletta still ringing in his ears, van der Merwe's little grey eyes peered keenly through the bush to where on the bank of the stream a solitary figure stood. He drew rein, looked more attentively, picked out the wiry, khaki-clad figure, then nodding a "Soh—the Boer prisoner—we must keep an eye on that *kerel*," proceeded on his way to du Bruyn's Rust.

Woodward, lost in thought, remained deaf to the pony's jog-trot. One hand was sunk deeply in his pocket, the other held a line. By his side, almost hidden among the tall bulrushes that grew profusely on either storm-washed, jagged bank, was a roughly-woven basket, partly filled with glistening, scaly, river "springers" together with a couple of still wriggling and exceedingly lively eels. Woodward mechanically held the line, but his thoughts were not with his angling, and after a few more catches he desisted and making a nest for himself among the green waving rushes settled down for a smoke.

Yet again, through the clouds that curled upward, a face persistently came and went, a form hovered and disappeared. It was the face and the form of the woman in whom, since their first meeting, Woodward had felt more than a passing interest. He recalled that first meeting, and how unattractive she had then appeared to him—this girl—she was little more—whom he now

admitted aroused in him the strongest sense of interest, the liveliest feeling of curiosity. He *liked* Margery Brandon, he told himself, that was really the proper word to fit his feelings for her. He admired her, he wished for her friendship ; but—and here was the rub—had he made any progress toward friendship with her since their first meeting ? He passed his hand across his brow as he lay on his back snugly sheltered by the tall rushes, and stared frowningly upward into the far-off unflecked blue of the winter sky ; then answered the question with a negative. There was something about her—puzzling—not altogether satisfactory—he could get no further than that.

Woodward, as he lay there by the stream, listening to the strange, almost human, articulation of its tale of life and life's eternal verities—love, sorrow, death—fell into one of those deep reveries in which, as in a vivid vision, we are enabled to trace step by step every inch of the road that has led us to a given point. He recalled with amazement his former indifference to the white-faced, weary-eyed, silent woman who, in her plain dark dress, had passed unobtrusively in and out of the room intent on household cares. He remembered how he had set her down as wife to young Thane Brandon, mother of the red-lipped precocious child ; as a drudge unworthy of notice, with the sweets of life no longer within her reach and the fires of life's golden prime already burnt out within her middle-aged frame. She had looked old, forbidding, unhappy, yet even then he had applied the term " old-young " in his classification of her. Some spark of her youth must even then have struck upon his sub-conscious recognition of the personality of Margery Brandon ; dolt—duffer—he now called himself ; and told himself she was very, very young in some respects, with a full flowing tide of blood and life and vigour and emotion lurking somewhere out of sight behind that mask of indifference, weariness, primness she so frequently assumed.

He had taken her for a white slave, a pack-horse—harnessed to the kitchen stove, the wash-tub, and the

mending-basket—doing a twenty-hour day's work to her husband's eight. He knew other households in which such an arrangement held good ; the wives—" old-young " as was Margery Brandon—were no longer wives, but hired servants, with the disadvantages of no wages or days off.

Then had followed a further disillusionment, and he had learned she was a daughter of the house—unwed. Woman's lot had pinned her down to the narrowest sphere of woman's existence—to home duties in the home of her parents. Her life had not blossomed in life's fullest and deepest sense ; she had lived unmated, single as the individual blossom that is brought into existence by Nature's deep contrivance, that arrives at maturity, but its being lacking the quickening influence of some responsive twin element, it stands awhile—fresh, fragrant, sweet, expectant—then at last, by the same Nature's irrevocable laws, grows sere and faded, withers by slow degrees, and changing into the drab stalk of old age passes into oblivion with Nature's prime object in creating it forcibly frustrated. Woodward's interest in Margery Brandon on that first day of their acquaintance had stirred within him nothing deeper than a passing sense of pity for the individual woman, a feeling of disgust at the apparent waste of life.

But on this had followed the first night at The Outspan, a night on which—as he yawned wearily and tossed from right to left upon the narrow iron bedstead in the small, white-washed, mud-floored, humble apartment—he had told himself that since he was to be kept a prisoner at this wayside homestead of the back-veldt he certainly ran no danger of losing his heart to the daughter of the house. So he had slept at last, slept soundly until the chill touch of the dawn came creeping over the bare, brown, frostbitten waste, and he had waked—to what ? Was it to meet his fate ? Woodward smiled and told himself very emphatically that he *liked* the girl ; loving was quite another matter.

He had roamed the world over, had seen women of many climes and lands—had criticized various types of beauty. The faces of many lovely women he could now recall as he lay gazing upward into the soft, blue ether, but they had stirred in him not one tithe of the interest aroused within his imaginings by this daughter of The Outspan, despite her veiled eyes and unattractive bearing.

With the dawn had come that sharply awakened curiosity concerning her, which still obsessed his imagination. He found himself continually thinking about her, constantly questioning with himself as to whether she were young or old, pretty or plain. Which was the mask? Which the true self? The scene at dawn had revealed her as human, as impulsive, as something more than the silent, apathetic, indifferent being she had previously appeared—had made herself appear. Her pluck, her passion, her self-forgetfulness in the difficult task of an evident attempt to hold back her brother from compromising himself with the daughter of the enemy, excited his admiration. He loved grit. Courage in man or woman appealed to him. From that dawn dated his curiosity about her, his warm liking for her, the wish for a closer friendship with this incomprehensible woman.

Was it the faint light that had deceived him, or had he in reality seen those dull eyes of hers alive with passion, fire, and gleaming beauty, such as they had appeared to him when she had started and jumped up from her crouching position on the bench and had gazed with that intent, penetrating gaze into his—the eyes of a woman for whom a man would dare much? The dimness around had, no doubt, been responsible for his fancy, nevertheless it remained a firm conviction and he saw still those wild, alluring eyes, the glow on the white face marking the straight features beneath the heavy black brows framed by the long, dark folds of her flowing hair.

Yes, in that light she had appeared a changed creature from the heavy-eyed, silent woman of the previous afternoon. It was only in that hour of the dawn that Wood-

ward, by a strange chance, had been allowed to catch a glimpse of what he now conceived to be the true Margery Brandon—a strong, forceful personality; a woman of vitality, of charm and vigour—young, enigmatic, fascinating—one who could dominate in outstanding measure the powers of love, passion, devotion; one who could love to the end, and hold love to the end! On his couch of rushes he laughed aloud and a bird in the bush twittered lightly in response. *She*, a dull, lifeless drudge! he had been a bit of a fool when he had set her down as that!

But chance alone had enlightened him—chance and a wild slip of a Boer girl enamoured of a fiery-tempered young Colonist. The dawn had brought to him a chance revelation that might otherwise never have been revealed to him. For: "I've tried to bring back that look to her face, but I'm hanged if I can," Woodward reflected grimly. He had tried, but always unsuccessfully, to learn something of herself, of her attitude towards life, of the experiences through which she had passed. That she had touched deep waters he felt assured. But with a quiet, almost lofty disdain, she had repelled the personal note in their otherwise friendly converse. Long evenings they had spent together as he smoked over the fire in the room where she sat with the eternal mending-basket, her brow touched with thought, her eyes dull or enigmatic. Pleasant evenings they had been, though: Babs helped to make things hum until her bedtime, after which the talk changed from jest to earnest, from commonplace to matters of serious import—yet always that one impregnable barrier, that detached attitude, screening from view her real self, her real beliefs and convictions of a personal nature which Woodward had found impossible either to sweep aside, to pierce, or to penetrate.

But penetrate the mystery, delve to those inmost fastnesses where the true Margery Brandon lived and moved and had her being, was the purpose he now set himself to achieve. It was curiosity and liking—simply curiosity and a friendly liking for this woman, and a kindly intent

toward her—that caused her so to haunt his imagination, Woodward told himself with a shrug of his shoulders and an uplifting of the eyebrows as he at last lazily got to his feet, knocked the ash from his pipe, picked up the basket of fish, and turned along the river side on his homeward way.

“I wish to be her friend, nothing but her friend,” he assured himself emphatically. To him she seemed a lonely soul living in the bosom of her own people, yet strangely, at the same time, living within a world of her own. To whom but to a faithful friend would she grant admission to that uncharted shore? But, having found such a friend—one with whom she could feel assured of mutual sympathies and mutual understandings—and having granted to him the key of the inner chambers of her heart, how great a consolation would be hers in the exchange of sympathetic thoughts, of mutual sentiments, of sacred secret outpourings of things past, things present, things to come, which now, locked closely within her veiled heart, weighed heavily, because unshared, upon her mind and soul. She was starving for want of friendship and sympathy and communion with some other soul—the bread by which man lives.

He lifted his eyes and saw the woman of whom he had been dreaming, over whom he had been puzzling. She sat before the table on the back verandah—a tray of cups and saucers before her, Babs busily fetching and carrying.

“There you are,” the child cried, brightly, “just in time for afternoon coffee.” She ran down the steps, caught his hands and peered into the basket. “One, two, three,” she counted joyfully. “Oh, Margey, he has caught most lovely *springers*! May we have them for supper?”

IV

"FOR *breakfast*, young lady," corrected Woodward as he passed the basket into her hands and sat down to the table.

"They are beauties," said Margery, peering into the basket at Babs' command and touching the gleaming scales with her finger-tips. "Take them to old Lisbeth, dear."

"And tell her to fry them for *supper*." Babs cast a backward glance of laughing defiance at the young man as she put a special emphasis on the last word and went indoors.

Woodward shook a reproving finger at her; then his eyes turned and rested upon the enigma who was pouring out the coffee in quite a matter-of-fact fashion.

"Tired?" he asked, as he took the cup from her hand. It was a square, capable hand, brown but shapely; a hand to whose possessor, Woodward told himself, treachery, meanness and duplicity were utterly foreign.

"No," she answered in the cool, somewhat surprised, wholly musical slur he knew so well and awaited with ever fresh interest and pleasure. "What makes you ask? I have had nothing extra to do to-day," she went on, not seemingly expecting any reply to her question. "We have had no Boer troopers calling for meals—they're all clearing out from here—after the Irregulars."

A lowering frown, called up by the reference to the hateful conflict, settled on her brow, which threw into lines of almost melancholy gravity the rest of her face.

"I asked," said Woodward, pointing to her forehead, "because of *that*. Trouble sits on your brow."

" 'Trouble is the salt of life,' says the fool who is too big a fool to feel it," she replied in a half-mocking, half-serious tone. " 'Trouble is the refiner that separates the gold from the dross,' says the district visitor to the poor, wretched creature who has a sick husband and a dozen hungry children looking to her and to her sweated wages to keep them from starvation. Trouble, I say, Captain Woodward, is the breath of life; so what's the use of our discussing a thing as inevitable as breathing?—a part of life we each had best bear in silence."

"No, my dear friend—may I call you that, though? Would you be offended?"

Indifference sat upon every feature of her now utterly expressionless face. So dull were her eyes when she threw a momentary glance across the table in his direction that Woodward could have taken an oath that never had these same eyes gleamed with the lightning-like flash of those wild eyes of his imagination.

"Why should I be offended?" she asked with the utmost composure.

"Oh—well—I don't know." He was furious with himself, yet could find no intelligible reply to the question as she framed it. "You see, I have not known you so very long," he explained lamely.

"Not for long as time counts in civilized communities," she replied calmly, "but here on the veldt, with its lonely little *dorps* and farms scattered here and there, and peopled by primitive and simple beings, it is different. In this country every stranger who comes to your door is your friend until he proves himself your enemy."

"Yes," he replied with heartiness, "Africa is a genial, open-handed country, and her great-hearted children are wise in their brotherliness and true hospitality; in their simple, kindly sincerities. But, since I may call you my friend—and think of you as one of the best of friends a man ever was blest with—let me persuade you to moderate your views of trouble. There are times in life when trouble mercifully forgets to visit us, and there are compensations

in life which mercifully are sufficiently powerful to cause us to forget trouble."

She shrugged her shoulders lightly.

"Then my remark merely argued a sceptical or morbid cast of mind, capable of destroying the best of friendships," she admitted carelessly.

"I shall not be frightened by that," he laughed. "I mean to hold you to your bond—my friend."

He jumped to his feet and put out his hand. Again she very slightly shrugged her shoulders but did not refuse his grasp. As he stood before her, magnetic and alive, she felt in that deep centre of her consciousness where she brooded and agonized—alone and alive to her bitter loneliness—that here before her, sent unexpectedly into her life, was a man worth having for a friend. Despite the dark mask she habitually wore, beneath the air of slight disdain and utter indifference that wrapped her like some outer vestment, she realized in a strange, frightened way that some chord within her being, long silent and unstirred, had been touched and played upon and had responded, however slightly, to the skilful handling of the player.

But of this she made no sign; only, as he released her hand and Babs came running back, she asked herself what attracted her to this man. The mystery that hides beneath the surface of all things, the magic of life that insistently thrusts itself upon us, surged up and overwhelmed thought. She was like someone moving in order to the tune of an ordinary life who suddenly is stopped by the sound of a different note, and stands—with all his senses astrain—too mystified and intimidated to investigate the nature of that change of tune.

"GEORGE, you *can't* mean it?"

Margery's low voice rang out on the quiet of the big kitchen, and the black rafters aloft echoed her cry. Her sleeves rolled up to her dimpled elbows, her firm, round arms vigorously kneading at a batch of rusks for which the expectant Dutch oven waited red-hot, she paused and bent her dark brows intently upon her brother's face.

George, sitting on a corner of the dresser at which she worked, laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Margery, you won't refuse to stand by me?"

His voice subdued her hot anger.

"When have I ever turned from you in your need?" she demanded huskily, looking across at the leaping flames that her brother might not see the mist that blinded her sight.

But he was conscious of the tears in her voice, and his heart agonized in silent sympathy with the bitter pain she was endeavouring to conceal, "To spare my feelings," he thought, with a fresh rush of pity and a fresh tug at those lifelong chords that linked his heart in true affection to hers.

"There is no one but you, dear, who would look at what I am doing in a reasonable light—no one who would so thoroughly understand; and I can't complain," he added soberly, "for it must seem just bravado or wilful unkindness to those who don't feel as I do."

He was shy of confessing, even to the sister so near to his heart as was Margery, how duty impelled him on to the course he needs must follow. He felt that she understood.

"Father will be cut up at the idea," he went on, "but you can talk him into it. Let him see there is absolutely no question of my joining with the intention of firing a shot; I go simply to help with the transport."

"You will have to fight if there is a skirmish," Margery said in those low, trembling tones that went to his heart; her lips were white and stiff, lines of deep pain made her face appear set and haggard. In a few brief moments of time she had changed from a proud, self-reliant woman to the semblance of some poor, shrinking, suffering creature upon whom sentence of irrevocable doom has suddenly been pronounced. "Going *means* fighting—make up your mind to that."

"No man can compel me to shoot."

"How could you avoid it—mixed up in some skirmish—seeing your comrades shot down?" she muttered, with dry lips.

"I shall not see it, old girl; don't imagine trouble. My work will be to remain at the base, at Louw's Krantz, and see after getting supplies sent through. There'll be no fighting there."

Margery tottered and sat down; her limbs could no longer support her, shaken as was her whole frame by the most violent emotions of terror and alarm. She spoke hoarsely, passionately.

"George! George! don't go! with all my heart and soul, with all the strength left in me, I beg and pray of you, my brother, don't join——"

Her voice broke on a low, sobbing note, and she gazed with eyes of burning entreaty into her brother's face. He knew not how to bear that wild gaze of terrible grief, yet he would not turn his gentle blue eyes from the sight lest he should thereby add to her fierce agony.

"Don't make it harder, Margery; help me to make the others see it rightly."

"Help you to your death, George!" she said, bitterly, "isn't that a cruel thing to ask of me? But I can't do that—no, I can't—often as I have told myself there was

nothing in life you might ask of me that I would not do. I would give my life for you—any day—willingly—you know it. But to help you to ruin, danger, perhaps death itself . . . Oh, can't you see, George, how bitter a thing you are asking of me ? ”

It was terrible to hear her voice, terrible to see her grief ; the wild pain that shone through her dark eyes, the settled lines of despair on her dark, frowning brows and white, anguished face. It was terrible to the young man to think of her still on the threshold of her life's prime, in the vigour of womanhood, at the fairest and freshest period of her life ; yet bereft of hope, bereft of illusions, deprived even of such measure of hope and consolation as had been left to her by their mutual life together. He rose and came to her side.

“ Margery, don't fret, dear ; think hard, old girl ; keep saying over and over to yourself, ‘ There's no danger, not the slightest. ’ Come, come, there's my brave sister—if it were any other chap how you would scoff and laugh at the bare idea of making a fuss over his helping with the transport ! Old van der Merwe has given his word of honour that nothing more will be required of me than to help in this way. ”

His cheerful tones heartened her ; with an effort she pulled herself together. Since George must go, she would not make it harder for him.

“ I don't trust him—no more than *that*, ” she said emphatically, indicating with snap of thumb and finger her utter distrust of the *predikant*. “ As to honour, ” she continued in a dry tone when she had wiped her eyes and returned to the kneading of her rusks, “ as to honour, you know as well as I do, George, that there's no meaning to them in that word—not to a wily old Boer who would stick at nothing in his country's cause and feel persuaded he was doing the Lord a very valuable service. Van der Merwe's *in* for this business ; in—the whole hog—and who can blame him ? He wants to keep the Irregulars from bothering around here ; so do we all. But for this very

reason I distrust him—yes, and the whole crowd about here—that fellow Bouwer, and all the rest of the gang. It's Thane and you that they are bent on dragging into a fight. They've got this mad scheme on for driving the Irregulars from their camps along the border; and that they'll never do."

"They won't do that," assented George, "but they may keep them from making a drive across the country. Certain it is that if the burghers do not combine and keep them back they may be upon us, here—any day. The burghers must hold them back. The *Commandants* are now all agreed as to that. Beyers is pressing them to the north; there is a rumour just in that he has ambushed and taken prisoners a large party of the Fighting Scouts—a lot killed, too, so they say."

"It's awful," Margery said with a faint sigh, "I wish the Irregulars were either here—this minute—or else beyond the back of nowhere."

"But they're lying on the border, creeping gradually nearer day by day," George returned, with the gleam of a smile softening his face. "And Thane and I are likely to get summoned any moment now. This offer of van der Merwe's will at least save me from being marched off by force—perhaps to some distant part. Better for me to join van der Merwe's lot as he offers."

"Better still to go off with Thane to Wyman's . . . Oh, why?"

"You know, dear . . . There is Aletta, too."

Margery sighed again as she deftly moulded the lump of dough into long rolls, and cut each roll into equal lengths. Then, laying these upon the baking-pans that stood ready greased, she passed each pan in turn to George who, with the ease born of practice, slipped them one by one into the hot oven.

"It would break up our lives together," he said, stooping to close the oven door, his back to his sister. "If I went with Thane——"

The note of sadness in his voice troubled her. After

all, what was he asking of them so tenderly, with such gracious humility? Merely that he might assist in a bloodless way in helping in the defence of his native land—all that was meant by the words “home” and “country” to him. The Transvaal was his birthplace, and his home, and his country. Its independence was as dear to him as to his Dutch neighbours. As a burgher, he could not sit with folded hands and watch its invasion by an alien army. . .

George was speaking again, and she raised her head to listen.

“It’s not that alone, you must remember, Margery. That if I do not join the burgher forces Aletta swears she will no longer be wife to me—that is not the reason of my decision. Always remember this, dear—for that I did it to please her, to keep her, will always be levelled at me wherever the world hears my story.” (“It’s human nature,” his sister put in.) “But *you* will know, Margery; *you* will never misjudge my motives—”

“I know you too well,” his sister groaned. “I know your way of looking at things, George, and how if you thought it right to take a certain course wild horses could not drag you from the path you had chosen. It’s lofty and honourable and all that, I know, and we are all proud of you—though we can’t be like you, because you have always been an angel of goodness compared with us—with Thane and me. But, oh, George”—she turned her burning eyes on his—“I can’t, *can’t* reconcile myself to your joining the commando! No, I can’t! Think for a moment of us—all of us here—who lean on you, and look up to you, and are dependent on you for all that makes our dreary lives worth living! It would kill father if anything went wrong with you—he is an old man, and—well, I suppose death comes mercifully to the old who suffer a bereavement—but there is Thane—your joining would bring certain disaster upon him—if he did not do some mischief to the Boers they would do some mischief to him—for he would be mad, and reckless, and desperate if—

Oh, George, think of us—of the child left without me——” her voice fell to a sob. “Haven’t I gone through misery enough to turn the strongest brain? Could I *live* and keep my reason if you were taken from me? And without our care what is to become of my poor Babs?”

“Hush, Margery,” implored her brother, as Babs’ childish, happy young laugh rang out suddenly from the distant garden. “Don’t give way to gloomy fears, dear. God knows”—his voice fell to a low note—“God knows I would rather die than add a sorrow to your life. But think, dear, you love me too well not to have me do my duty as a man; you will be proud when it’s all over to think you were brave enough to have said to me ‘go.’ When the Transvaal is in peril it is not for her burghers to turn their backs on her. Margery, I have never seen you fail in courage or spirit. Be your own brave self, my sister, while I am away; cheer poor father up. And Thane—look well after him—never fail him, dear; often he will be trying and hasty, but have patience—say to yourself: ‘I will never fail him, for George’s sake.’”

His big, sun-browned fingers stroked her hair as she leaned her head upon his shoulder, her frame shaken by low, tearless sobs.

“It will cost you your life—I see the end,” she moaned.

“If it be our Heavenly Father’s will that this war means death to me,” George said quietly, “remember, dear, the other lives—the other mothers and sisters who are mourning their loved ones fallen in Africa; others, too, who will have to mourn the loss of friends whose lives will be sacrificed before this war is over. Think of these, dear, and so take heart to meet with courage the tragedy of death, should it touch your own.”

“Not you, George,” she shuddered.

“Why should I any more than another escape?” he asked, soberly. “Anyhow, there is no special danger—no danger at all—in what I am undertaking; so cheer up, Margery old girl, and make the others see I am but doing my duty”

"Thane doesn't think it a duty," she said faintly but with an effort at return to composure as she dried her eyes and bestirred herself to the business of removing the rusks from the oven.

"He looks at it from an entirely different point of view," remarked her brother, following her across the stone-paved kitchen; "he is right in acting according to his conscience—I only wish I could see it as he does," he added half-regretfully, "but I can't."

The outer door burst open, and Babs, rosy with the kisses of the frosty night air, ran into the room, followed by Rover and a couple of shaggy-coated Irish terriers. In the distance Woodward lingered on the threshold, looking into the warm, lighted kitchen. From the oven came a most appetizing odour of freshly-baked biscuits.

Babs flung herself upon George, who had resumed his seat on the edge of the dresser, clasping his knees caressingly.

"Oh, we've had such a *ripping* time—and I am so hungry." She turned to Margery. "Give me a bun, Sissie, a big one—one that you haven't divided," for Margery was again breaking the buns into sections before finally drying them in the oven.

"Shut the door, child," she said impatiently, "or the oven will cool."

Babs turned her head, shook her curls out of the way, and called to the shadowy figure in the doorway:

"Come in, Captain Woodward, Margery won't mind. He's given me such a *ripping* time," she explained to her elders. "We've been stalking hares, and Sampson"—she patted the head of one of the terriers—"Sampson *nearly* caught one; he chased him right down to the river."

"Come in and have a bun," George said, smiling across at Woodward. "I hope my little sister hasn't bothered you."

"It was a great pleasure to have Miss Babs' company," Woodward returned, pleasantly. They all laughed at Babs' indignant face and at her tragic exclamation: "*Bothered him! Well!*"

VI

"I WISH the stupid old Generals would hurry themselves," Babs remarked in tones of simulated anger, breaking in upon the conversation of her elders as, some moments later, they were all gathered about the warm chimney-corner discussing the war.

She herself was comfortably curled on the floor beside the terriers, her head resting against Margery's knees as the latter, her occupation over, crouched on the settle drawn up before the fire.

They made an arresting picture from which Woodward found it difficult to turn his eyes. The woman with her shapely arms—soft and floury, bared to the elbow—looked down with that half-fierce, wholly-pathetic look so unmistakably associated with maternal solicitude and maternal watchfulness upon the bright mass of tangled curls shading the pure, innocent brow of the little rosy-faced speaker, that the man's heart involuntarily went out to her. In that instant he realized with a sense of dismay that it had passed from him beyond recall; felt that he would give his life to shield her from pain and sorrow. The next moment:

"This is madness!" he told himself. "What do I know of this woman?" Yet, despite his annoyance, he found himself studying every line and feature of that strange masked face with the curled lips, lined with life's bitter experiences, white now with the recent emotion and anguish through which its owner had just passed.

Then he found George Brandon's gentle blue eyes

regarding him with a certain intense surprise, dismay, interrogation, in their gaze that puzzled him, and his annoyance fanned itself to a white heat of self-accusation, of fury at his besotted idiocy.

"Yes, they *are* stupid," Babs was arguing in tones of childish vehemence. "Why can't they hurry up and make peace? The Boers want peace; they jolly well wish the war was over; yes, they do, Margery. How do I know, Captain Woodward? I know, because Tante Jacoba says so, and *she* knows; she is a wise woman. You see, it's because Oom Jan, her husband, is a wise man, and he tells her everything. She says when I am a grown-up maiden about to *opzit*, she will let me into a secret—a very great secret."

Babs hugged herself with joy and looked expectantly to the others.

"What secret, Babsie?" George asked good-naturedly, humouring her whim.

"The secret of how to make your husband tell you everything—every single, little thing," cried the child triumphantly. "So then I'll be a wise woman too," she added, with a note of supreme content in her fresh young tones.

"So the wise Tante thinks the Boers are sick of the war?" Woodward asked, when the laughter over Babs' secret had subsided.

"Of course," Babs returned, importantly. "She says they would have given in long ago, but for a few *verdoemd* Free Staters, who haven't had their fill of fighting—the beasts!"

"They are fighting for their country, Babs; you should not call them names," George put in, mildly.

"Well, it's time they left off," Babs pouted; "then we could get our things through. Look at my old shoes, *broertje*," she stretched out a foot clad in a well-worn pair of *veldtschoens*. "Aren't you sorry to see me so shabby?"

"That's no very terrible hardship, Babsie." Margery

patted the shining hair. "Think of Captain Woodward—kept a prisoner."

"Who may get marched out and shot some fine morning," the Captain added unconcernedly.

Babs started up in horror.

"Oh, no! no! You are just trying to frighten me! Isn't he, *broertjie*?"

"He's quite safe, don't you worry, girlie," George said soothingly, wondering how the poor child would bear the news of his departure. He looked across at Margery. She understood his silent request, "Break it gently to her," and there rushed over her a sense of the magnitude of the task which lay before her.

"No harm will come to Captain Woodward so long as he doesn't attempt to escape," she told Babs, as she raised herself from her stooping position.

Her eyes met Woodward's fully for the first time since they had clasped hands on the back verandah. The look in their keen, grey depths, as he steadily regarded her, again troubled her, causing her to experience that vague, intangible thrill of dread, the sense as of some strange note sounding clear and deep above the ordinary tune of life, a note she refused to investigate or consider. She lowered her head as before, gazing direct into the fiery heart of the burning logs.

"No, not unless I attempt to escape," Woodward repeated, echoing her words. "And you won't let me do that, Babs?"

"No, indeed," exclaimed the little girl. "I'll hold you fast." She grasped his hand between her small, plump palms, suiting the action to the words. "But you'd never try to run away?" she questioned, uplifting earnest, jewel-bright eyes to his. "You like us all too much to want to go away, don't you? Margery and I'll take you for such nice rides and walks. We'll take you to the very top of the mountain, up the footpath we always use—no one but we Brandons can use it, it's on our own farms, you see—and you'll just be *astonished*

when you look round from World's View," Babs added, proudly. "You'll see something."

"As far as to the Australian camp?" Woodward asked, smiling.

"Farther—much farther," cried Babs, emphatically.

"A sheer hundred miles—away to the horizon—with nothing but veldt, sky and freedom," Margery's low voice put in dreamily.

"Except a few veldt *dorps* and farms scattered between; you forget these," said her brother. Turning to Woodward, he added: "Yes, on a clear day you get a glimpse of several camps along the border; you catch a gleam of white and know that is canvas. Then there's Leyden, Emigratie, Fort Edward, and one or two other little post-stations and *dorps* here and there."

"And you see against the sky-line the blue mountain-ranges, with a hundred blue and purple valleys in between," Margery explained for Woodward's better information. "And in the summer and autumn the waving, red-brown grasses——"

"—and the bush, and the *kopjes*, and the thorn-trees! Oh, there are ever so many *lovely* things for you to see from World's View, Captain Woodward," Babs echoed joyfully, jumping up and down and squeezing his sun-browned hand warmly between her small, moist palms. "You mustn't *think* of running away."

"I won't, Babs; I promise you most solemnly I never, *never* will," Woodward returned in tones which carried conviction to the hearts of his hearers.

Footsteps tramping heavily up the garden-path brought Thane by the back entrance into the house. He came striding down the passage and stood within the door, frowning upon the little group gathered around the fire. His brow was dark and lowering, his steel-grey eyes shot fire. Margery, looking round, read in his face his knowledge of George's intention of joining van der Merwe's commando. "It is Jo—the little fiend," she thought, despairingly; "she has been blabbing—as usual."

VII

THANE looked pointedly at Babs.

"Send the kid to bed, Margery," he said, shortly. "I won't go, Thane," Babs remarked promptly, answering for herself. "You've got something nasty to say; I'd rather stay and hear it."

George rose from his seat. He, too, recognized the inevitable, and sought to avert the coming storm.

"We'll go to your room, Thane."

His brother flung himself against the tall dresser.

"It may as well be said here," he muttered hoarsely. "Is it true, George—this story I've been hearing from Jo?"

"What is that?" asked George, patiently.

As the two brothers—powerfully-built men both—stood facing each other, Woodward was struck afresh by a sense of the horrible nature of the conflict devastating their native land. George Brandon's attitude he could understand, and with his conception of duty he felt the strongest sympathy. Born and bred in the Transvaal, every manly and patriotic impulse within the simple, honest nature of this young Transvaaler urged upon him the necessity of taking up arms in the defence of his native country. Yet, the tragedy of his so doing lay in every drop of blood pulsing through the powerful frame of the squarely-built, fair-haired Saxon with the gentle blue eyes of his northern forbears, and the sentiments and sympathies which linked him to those of his own race and blood. Ties of kinship knit his soul with stead-

fast grip to the personality of every Briton warring against the Transvaal ; while at the same time the more weighty instincts of birth and lifelong intimate associations—those undying influences which shadow and surround for every one of us the mysteries of pre-natal days and subconscious existence—had moulded him in thought, and spirit and being, a Transvaaler. The Transvaal was his *country*. Duty spoke in no uncertain voice. For his country in her peril he must raise a helping hand or be less than a man in his own eyes.

To each one of us Nature speaks in a greater or lesser degree. "Blood creeps where it cannot walk," says the Boer proverb, and in the case of Thane Brandon, proud of his purely British descent, to lift a hand against his kin from the Mother Country across the ocean appeared a despicable crime—a crime beyond redemption. His sympathies chimed in every whit as strongly as did his brother's with the Northern Transvaalers in their courageous attempt to keep the invaders of their country at bay ; he was too plucky a man not to admire pluck and grit in others. He considered, too, that the Boers in thus fighting were but defending the liberty and freedom of their Republic as, in his opinion, they had every just right to do. But for himself and his brother, of British extraction as they were, there could be no joining the ranks of the brave burghers. Neither could they raise a finger against these fellow-countrymen. Either course was to the hot-tempered young Transvaaler, with his British blood and descent and his independent views of thought and conduct, entirely and utterly impracticable and impossible. To lift a hand against Britain would be to shame himself as a man in his own eyes, so Thane reasoned, hotly ; and as he stood facing the brother who was to bring, as he considered, this shame and disgrace upon their stainless name, so deeply was there stamped upon his broad, dark brow and strong, handsome face the bitterness and resentment his forceful, passionate nature suffered at the bare thought of his brother's inten-

tions in the matter that Woodward found himself dominated by as strong a sense of sympathy with his attitude upon the burning question of the moment as, but a few moments previously, he had experienced with the attitude and views of the elder brother. Both were in their rights; neither was acting unworthily; neither, he felt, would draw back from the path chosen. Woodward gazed fascinated, as he saw before him the tragedy of a wrecked household, a divided family, a broken home; as he visualized the inevitable separation, pain and misery to be entailed upon this humble, wayside family—bound to each other by the strong chords of deep, true, lifelong affection—by the Monster whose presence unpityingly threw its shadow across these far backwaters of the main current of the stream of life.

Thane's voice broke on the silence around:

"Ah . . . I can hear by your tone. . . . It is true, then! You have promised that old psalm-singing Judas to join his commando at Louw's Krantz?"

"What's that?"

The inquiry came from old Brandon who, attracted by Thane's loud tones, had been roused from his nap over the sitting-room fire, and now in slippered feet stood in the doorway leading out from the passage. "Who's going to join a d——d commando?" he demanded of his younger son.

Thane, with a fierce gesture of his thumb, indicated his brother.

"George!" "George!" his name fell from the lips of father and sister—a harsh remonstrance from the former, a pathetic cry impossible of restraint from the latter; while, at the same moment, with a sharp burst of terror, Babs rushed forward, clutching at his arm and exclaiming indignantly:

"Oh! no! no! Thane, what wicked lies you are telling!" Then looking up into the young man's saddened face, she burst forth again: "It isn't true, *broertjie*, is it? You don't mean to leave us do you? You

would never go and fight just for the sake of helping those horrid old Boers, who *will* keep on fighting and killing people and getting killed themselves? Oh, you'd never leave us for that! Say you don't mean to leave us, *broertjie*?"

"Hush, Babsie!" said George, and in his pain at the distress of the little creature he loved so dearly the young man stooped and lifted her up. With arms flung round his neck she clung to him, sobbing passionately.

"Be quiet, darling," Margery said gently, patting the small, heaving shoulders. She had swept across the kitchen, and with her tall frame held erect now took her stand beside her brother, ready to dare all in his defence.

"Let us speak this once about it," George began, as Babs' sobs presently sank to an occasional deep shudder. "And you, Captain Woodward, don't leave us," he added, as Woodward, in perplexity as to how he ought to act in this purely family affair, was silently making for the doorway.

At George's words he returned and took up his former position before the fire, inwardly satisfied to continue a spectator of the tragic drama about to be enacted in the kitchen of the lonely post-house.

George was speaking again, and to him:

"We have all learned to look upon you as a friend, and I should like any man of British extraction—like ourselves—to hear what I have to say about this business. Ever since the war started I have foreseen this day—the day when Thane and I should have to choose whether to fight in the defence of our country or to stand aside. Each of us, I felt, must decide for himself—must act as his individual conscience should direct. For myself, I have long felt that, though the common instincts of humanity forbade my taking arms against my blood and kin, yet as a burgher of the Transvaal, a native-born of the soil, I could not stand by while our country was invaded, the liberty of our Republic imperilled, and our very homes and possessions threatened by an armed foe. It has worried me all through—it has been a nightmare

to me, for I said, 'I must help my country in her need'; yet"—he turned to his father and brother—"I thought, too, of you, father, and how to do this, yet at the same time not to hurt and disappoint you and Thane, bothered me still more. I now see a way out of the difficulty—no, Thane, there is no disgrace about it. Van der Merwe has asked my help with getting supplies to the Louw's Krantz Camp, and from there on to the various outposts where the men will meet. He gives his word that I shall not be asked to leave the base camp, nor, under any circumstances, to lift a hand against the Irregulars. Well, van der Merwe's a good sort; he can be trusted. On consideration I have decided to help in this way. I had just told Margery," he added, "and she had promised to let you know—for I knew how much you would dislike the idea."

"Dislike!" said old Brandon, gazing in astonishment at his son. "Nay, that's not the word for it, my boy. Trouble's the word for it; lifelong sorrow's the word for it; and it'll be the setting of the sun of my life if you go, George, for mischief 'ull befall you in the way, mark my words; make no mistake about it, my boy, if you go trusting the Boer *predikant* you'll rue it. 'His word,' say you! Man alive! he'll wriggle out of that easily enough, when once he has got you safe in his toils at the burgher camp!"

"I'd sooner trust a tiger," Thane growled.

"George," asked his sister, anxiously, "can you be sure he won't drag you into this fight with the Irregulars?"

"As sure as a man can be of anything in life," George answered reassuringly, "if only for Aletta's sake he will keep his word."

Thane sneered.

"Why, confound it all! Don't you know she would do her utmost to get you pot-shooting at the men of your own blood and nationality?"

"Don't say that, old chap," his brother returned,

flushing under the sneer and implied slur on the absent Aletta; "don't think it."

"Think it, man? I know it! Isn't she crazy over the idea of adding an Englishman to the Boer strength?"

"Do you mean she wants to get rid of me?" his brother demanded, a flicker of pain shadowing his clear blue eyes.

"I mean that country and people count first with her now. Isn't it these confounded Boer women who are keeping the men up to the scratch? The women are death on holding out to the end. It's a madness, a fanaticism that's come over them, blinding their eyes to everything else. They'd sacrifice their husbands, their children, their own lives—whatever the cause demanded—to this end. Aletta's a strong-natured woman. She's badly bitten; you must look upon her mad wish that you should join the burghers as a craze—a disease—don't let it influence you——"

"It's not Aletta," George interrupted, firmly; "you should know me better than to think that. I go to help our country simply because it seems to me that as a burgher I must join in her defence in some way; and as I now see a way to do so without being called upon to fight the British forces, I feel it my duty not to let slip the opportunity. Try and look at it from my point of view."

"Not if I tried for ever! not if I tried for a lifetime could I understand your doing what seems to me a downright disgraceful thing for any Englishman to do!" Thane retorted with fierce vehemence. "I'd never have thought it of you, George! Never! If any fellow had ever hinted to me that you'd shame us and shame the name of Brandon by fighting the English, why I'd have knocked it down his throat for a damned lie—so I would. It's not like you, George, to play so low a game!" he added, bitterly.

"But it's like him, Thane, to do what he thinks right—to do his duty at any cost."

Woodward started and stared as the words fell in clear,

distinct notes from the full, bell-toned voice. It was Margery speaking. She still stood by her brother's side; no longer the listless, enigmatic woman she was wont to appear, but a being endowed with vitality, force, power. Her tall figure, drawn to full height, appeared to dominate the situation; her face, alive with love, worship, devotion, reverence, she fixed her gleaming, deep-set eyes on the younger brother as she continued:

"Could *you* do it?—even if you felt you ought as a burgher to defend the Transvaal, could you—or any English colonist here"—she waved a hand disdainfully towards Woodward—"could you have the courage to do what George is doing? No—you know you could not! Is there another English South African, born in the Transvaal, one of our sworn burghers, who is risking what George is risking—the being called a renegade and a traitor by a world that can't comprehend a disinterested motive, that consistently misinterprets the noblest actions—to help his country? You know there is not. There's not one man in a thousand—in ten thousand—who would have the moral pluck to do his duty in spite of being misunderstood, of being branded as a rebel and an outcast—yes, George, I will speak. Thane knows very well in his heart of hearts that he may well be thankful to own such a man for his brother! Father, you ought to be proud you have such a son as George! If you don't stand by him now—the pair of you—you aren't worthy of him."

As the full, musical ring of the deep, passion-laden voice rose and fell, re-echoed from the bare, high-arched roof, her eyes, brilliant and searching, swept round the fire-lit kitchen; and Woodward—leaning forward anxiously in order to catch her every word—thrilled with a deep inward exultation as he again saw in their gleaming depths the soul of the woman—magnetic, majestic, human! Then he had not been mistaken in that dawn of the new day? It had been no fancy on his part—that vision of eyes alluring and passionate, of a face stamped with the touch of youth, and vigour and inward

fire? For here, again, Margery Brandon stood before him, her face bare of the mask of indifference, listlessness, disdain, with which she was wont to clothe it, as, unconscious of all else, she stood, intent only upon defending the being dearest to her heart.

He looked upon the real woman now and rejoiced. He had penetrated at last her reserve; the coldness of her manner had disappeared beneath the warmth of her words. He understood something of the depth and intensity of her nature and felt half envious of the love, divine and heroic, that dominated her being; leaving, as it seemed to him, her strong, passionate heart empty of all things else. He turned his eyes on the figure of the man by her side—One to be pitied? No! To have called forth such a love from such a woman showed George Brandon as favoured among mortals.

"Damme!" said the old man, answering her words, "Margery girl, we know George's worth without being told it by you. But, George, my boy, *don't do it*. I say the game's not worth the candle; don't you be led away by all this talk of duty, and duty . . . It may all sound very fine, but it won't work—it won't work . . . You're an English South African, but a Transvaaler, and it's your duty to sit tight till this rumpus between John Bull and Paul Kruger is done and over. Thane is off to-morrow—you slip away with him."

"Yes, George," echoed both brother and sister imploringly; and "Yes, George. Oh, do—*do* go with Thane!" sighed Babs, creeping closer within his arms; while Woodward, coming forward, added his voice to the general entreaty.

"I can't say how I sympathize with you both," he added, frankly. "It is one of those countless cases in which each man must be fully persuaded in his own mind."

Then he left them, feeling his presence could no longer be desired in the final moments of the tragedy.

Hardly had the door closed upon his retreating footsteps than a feeling of desolation took possession of those

left behind. Never, since the little family had gathered, in an anguished, never-to-be-forgotten hour around the death-bed of the devoted wife and mother, had they been called upon to drink of so bitter a cup. To the elders it meant the hour of a fresh, disastrous, irrevocable break in their family life which, end as it might, time itself could not mend, a sorrow life could not heal. George Brandon wavered and asked himself if, in the face of the bitterness his purpose was creating between himself and his loved ones, it would be possible to carry out that purpose. His face was pale and strained with the force of violent, overpowering emotion. Silently he held Babs in his arms, while his sister pressed to his side, her head on his breast. No sound but the faint, distressed sobs of the woman and child sounded in his ears. His father with bent head—a shrivelled, aged figure—stood ruefully pulling his grizzled beard, but his eyes were moist and his heart heavy. Only Thane remained erect, defiant, with fierce dry eyes and lowering brows. Over the head of his weeping sister George threw a gaze of intensity towards him through the mist which veiled his own sight.

It was his farewell to his own, to those dearest and closest to his affections. Never again—though life was spared to him and though he emerged safely from the perils which beset the path on which he was bent—could he be as he had been to these, his own people, before the cruel blight of merciless war had caused heartburnings and divisions between them—separating brother from brother, father from son, and causing his foes to be “they of his own household.” “Thane, old boy,” he said brokenly, stretching out his hand.

But, Thane—beside himself with the inwardly-raging madness caused by his fury against the man he loved best and most tenderly—turned on his heels and moved heavily through the outer door into the night. As he flung himself out of sight and sound of The Outspan he cursed himself, cursed the war, cursed life—and suffered as the strong-natured alone are capable of suffering.

VIII

AFTER a fruitless search for the absent Thane, conscious of the magnitude of the shock under which he was suffering, George wended his homeward way, despondent and heavy-hearted. Of all those whom he held dear, of all who held him dear, there was, he felt, no one whom his decision would affect more intimately, nor act upon more adversely, than Thane. From boyhood upward he had swayed his younger brother by the power of a tranquil but deep-rooted affection. These two had been friends as well as brothers of a lifetime. Thane, hot-tempered and obstinate, refusing to be guided by parents or preceptors, had been amenable to one influence only—the influence of his elder brother. Like most unruly natures, where he gave affection he gave it whole-heartedly. With a passionate unreason, tragic in its depth and intensity, Thane had chosen from the days of his earliest infancy to set George on a pedestal apart, above all others, there to do him homage and worship. As he grew older he would permit himself an occasional smile at his elder brother's ideals and sentiments—high-flown though he considered them—but woe to the unlucky member of the Brandon *ménage* whom he might happen to detect doing likewise! George, as he trudged up the hill through the frosty air of the night, recalled with mixed feelings of pain and pleasure one of these occasions when, for some such trivial transgression, the peace of The Outspan was rudely disturbed for several days during which the stubborn youth fought fiercely for the due meed of

respect and honour which he considered should be accorded to his brother.

It was this influence and example, the ideal held ever before him by the brother whom he secretly adored, that had grown with Thane's growth through those long years of childhood and adolescence, finally softening and strengthening his manhood. Not for worlds would he have confessed to the feeling, but it was this wish to stand well in George's eyes, to earn the good opinion of his brother, that had kept him morally on the right path. Was the low standard of morality of many among his associates forced upon his attention, with a rough oath he would brush aside tendencies to share in their sentiments or actions; such would debar him from the pleasure he experienced in meeting George's gentle but searching blue eyes, knowing in his heart of hearts that thus to meet them he had overcome some temptation, had successfully combated some evil.

To George's welfare and good repute he was even more sensitive than to his own. It was a secret source of satisfaction to Thane to reflect that so faulty and rough a chap as himself should own a brother imbued with so high a conception of duty, so noble an ideal of conduct, one cast in so gentle and chivalrous a mould as had fallen to the inheritance of his brother. And now the bare thought that this idealized and idolized brother should be the one to bring a slur on their name; that words of contempt, insult, execration and condemnation could, and would, be hurled at the heir of the Brandons without possibility of contradiction or repudiation, was to Thane as some deadly heart-wound, was, in short, a far more bitter and humiliating reality than the fact itself—hideous though that fact appeared to him—that his brother had joined the enemy warring against England and her sons.

"Poor old Thane! Dear old boy!" thought George, with a revival of tenderness upspringing in his heart at the thought of this wayward, devoted brother; the

staunch, true friend of a lifetime. "Never before has he had so much as a hard thought of me," he reflected miserably, as he passed upward and onward through the dim night. From the dark, velvety pall of the wide-spreading, cloudless heavens the stars shone brilliantly luminous, lighting up with a soft shadowy dimness the spaces of an open country stretching around into vague immensity—solitary, waste, virgin; stubbornly bare for the most part, yet dear to the hearts of the sons of the soil born and reared on its rugged bosom. Yes, his country was very close to his heart, very dear to him, but his brother came dearer and closer still; and conciliate and reconcile Thane to the step he was about to take before going to the Boer camp, George told himself he must certainly do. So imperative did this step now appear to him that he resolved to write a few lines of appeal and affection immediately on reaching his home.

Arrived at this decision, he felt more cheerful, and rounding the incline faced the lights of the Top Farm. The sleeping dogs, aroused by his footsteps, awoke and rushed threateningly with loud barks and deep growls towards the intruder, but recognizing the form of the master they fawned upon him with slavish delight. George patted the heads of the most persistent among his canine friends, then entered the house.

Aletta sat before the fire; her large, capable hands folded idly, no work or book within reach.

"Still up?" asked George as he bent to kiss her fair, heavy brow. "Have you been lonely, little one? Has the time seemed long?"

Aletta had drawn him down and pressed her lips to his.

"No, sweetheart"—he noticed the return to softness in her voice—"not lonely, for Ma is here; she has just gone to bed." She pointed to the closed door of the spare-room from which a low, deep, thunderous sound proceeded announcing that Tante Jacoba slept. "But

all the same, I missed my husband . . . how should it be otherwise ? ”

“ Yet you won’t be satisfied unless I ride over to Louw’s Krantz ? ” George asked carelessly, as he sat down at a side table which held his desk and writing materials.

“ *Almachtig !* George,” the woman cried sharply, and now there was a touch of fierceness in her tone. “ Would you imply that I *want* you to go ? ”

“ Isn’t that what you want ? ” he questioned with slow precision as he started to write.

She glanced wrathfully at his bent head, then exploded :

“ I want you to do what a *man* should do—a man who is a burgher of our Republic—sworn to her service. Since you can’t do this without leaving me, must I hold you back ? Does a woman of my mind and temper submit to a husband who won’t fight when his country calls ? ”

Her husband made no reply. She calmed down after her outburst.

“ George, I am sorry ; forgive me—but it’s the blood in me. Don’t stir me up. . . . I can’t help what I say when it’s this *verdoemd* war-business under discussion.” She rose and stood before him, penitent over her unkind words ; for was not her man going forth to the fray, and should he not, therefore, be made much of, be humoured—Sultan-like—and caressed, and meekly obeyed ?

But George showed no inclination to play the part of tyrant or lover. Instead, he roused himself only so far as to answer gently :

“ Don’t worry over what can’t be helped, little woman ; I’ll do what I think right, and you must be satisfied with that.”

She looked down on his absorption, scarcely satisfied by the tenor of his remark. It was enigmatic and puzzled her. That he would keep his promise, however, she felt assured, therefore contented herself that all was well and turned to the fire.

“ I’ve kept your coffee hot ; it will warm you up.”

She watched him fold and address the sheet of paper

on which he had been writing. Placing this upon his old pocket-book which lay on the desk he rose and crossed to the door leading on to the stoep.

"Where are you going?" she questioned in surprise; "supper is just ready."

"I'll be back in a second," he answered from the doorway. "I must wake Zimbene."

"Whatever for?—at this time of night!" she demanded.

His voice came wafted back from the stoep:

"To take a note down home."

Aletta stared at the empty room. "A note to The Outspan"? The words instantly aroused her half-formed suspicions as to some plot on hand to hold George back from his word—a plot planned by the arch-traitor Thane! He had proved a *duivel* to poor Jo; he would tear George from his wife, from his duty, and hurry him off into hiding! Of Thane's intentions she had formed some idea through persistent inquisitorial cross-questioning of the distracted Johanna, and thus had learned something of his plan to carry off George into hiding.

Should this thing be and she not prevent it? She could prevent it did she know from what quarter the danger threatened, how nearly it pressed; George might be spirited off at any moment!

How better could she learn their plans than by opening and reading the note?

It lay before her in a white, inviting innocence clearly outlined by the shabby black pocket-book. Aletta's hand went out towards it and then drew sharply back. Never yet had she stooped to the trick of learning her husband's secrets by a surreptitious opening of his correspondence; but, then, as she told herself, never before had there been any secrets, real or imagined, in his correspondence. For this deed, if forced upon her, the war was certainly responsible.

Aletta went so far as to pick up the note and finger it. She eyed it, as she might have eyed the Evil One himself, with hatred and fear in her glance and with the very

deepest suspicion as to its nature. Then hastily she laid it down again. The responsibility of so momentous a deed must be shared. She hurried into the spare-room.

A placid, regular succession of rolling thunder-bursts proceeded from the bed, where—deeply sunk in the centre of a thick down-mattress, and covered by a handsome silver-jackal kaross—reposed a huge, billowy mass of femininity.

"Ma," said Aletta eagerly, gripping her mother's enormous arm and shaking it steadily and firmly; then: "Ma, Ma! wake up, *toch!*"

With a particularly-telling snore ending in a terrific snort, Tante Jacoba at last opened her little, faded blue eyes.

"Wake up, *toch*, Ma," repeated her daughter, impatiently. "It's something important I want to ask you."

"Not the place on fire?" grunted the old lady, sniffing suspiciously as she heaved the huge dimensions of her ponderous frame from out the deep channel in the feather-bed with wonderful agility.

"It's no fire," returned Aletta, hurriedly, "but there's a thing that means life or death to me and George—and how to find it out I don't know."

"*Heer!*" exclaimed the startled old *wrouw*, sitting up in bed and blinking at the candle in the next room. "Soh! But how can it be found out? Can I help?"

"I could find it out by opening a note George has just written and left on the desk in there"—she flung a hand towards the sitting-room—"while he has gone to the huts to wake the boy to take it down to The Outspan. It has to do with some plot of that *duivel* Thane . . . I know it has."

The mother stared bewildered.

"But why don't you read it, then? Hurry up, girl, before George gets back. You'll hear him coming along half-way up the road."

"Y-e-s," Aletta returned hesitatingly; "but, Ma, you know I have always tried to live as high as my husband—to do nothing mean that he would think low and unworthy

. . . so I don't like to open his note . . . because it wasn't meant for me to see . . . I came to ask, Ma, if you thought I ought to read it—just to find out what that *schelm* Thane is up to and so prevent him from getting George to go off with him—hiding somewhere."

"Tch! tch! tch! *Is that all?*" snapped the old woman as she tumbled back among the pillows. "Aletta, you are a fool! Waking me up to ask a silly thing like that! Haven't I and your Pa taught you your Bible that you must needs come here at midnight and rouse a person out of their sleep just to know whether your husband's letters aren't the same as your letters? Does not the dear Lord tell us in the Book that man and wife are one; and that their farms and cattle and sheep—yes, and letters too—belong equally to the one as the other? That, in there, is just as much your letter as your husband's; so says the Book, and we can never go wrong if we keep to the Book. There now, go away do, and read the letter . . . Only, my girl," she called after her daughter as the latter hurried back into the next room, "but it would be just as well that you don't let your husband catch you reading it; these *Engelsch* are godless *kerels* and don't always go by the Book. *Toch! toch!* to think I should be waked up just for a simple little thing like that . . . and me with my bad chest . . ." Her voice trailed off into incoherence.

But, Aletta, heedless of the wail, having mastered the brief contents of the note, folded and replaced it on the pocket-book as with a faint, contemptuous curl of her full red lips she turned to her occupation over the fire. To think, she told herself angrily, all this fuss and bother should have arisen through that *duivel* Thane and his tantrums—and George as usual wanting to smooth him down! Why could not George stand up to him and give him a piece of his mind? Why should he always strive to conciliate him? Before this war had come to throw a bomb in their midst Aletta and Thane had always been on the best of terms—good friends. But the conflict

had kindled a fire of resentment between the two, and Aletta's newly-formed suspicions of his treatment of her sister now caused her to hate him with the bitterest intensity, while Thane on his part was stirred to a white heat of fury against his sister-in-law for her insistence on the part her husband should take in the hostilities. Still dwelling upon certain traits in her husband's character, which, indeed, she could neither understand nor appreciate, she watched George somewhat curiously as—having dispatched the bearer with the note and an injunction to hurry himself so as to hand it to the Young Master (Thane's boyish appellation to which the natives still clung) before he went to bed—he at last sat down to his neglected supper.

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IX

EARLY in the dawning of the new day he awoke unrefreshed from restless slumber, haunted by dreams of dire calamities, and leaving his bedroom passed into the open air. The night-breezes had sunk into quiet with the advent of sunrise, and beneath a pale grey sky, unflecked by cloud-bank or solitary drifting cloudlet, the young man moved aimlessly through the drenched scrub, past the dripping thorn bushes, a lonely figure, his eyes unconsciously uplifted to the towering height of World's View. Some echo, doubtless, it was, striking upon a chord of his inmost being and recalling the days of boyhood when a mother's earliest teachings had stamped upon his memory the idea of association between the mountain-tops with the gift of strength and help granted in time of need, that now caused him involuntarily to look up to the familiar boulder-strewn top for help in his present trouble, for guidance at this crisis in his experience when he felt himself caught and held within the toils of a divided duty. Simple, fearless, true—his creed had hitherto been the direct and quiet performance of duty. Unselfish, large-natured, gifted with the graces of tenderness and kindly sympathy, he had moved along the common road of daily, uneventful existence to the measured impulses of conscience and intelligence. There was a right way and a wrong. To choose the right, to adhere to it, this had been the simple ideal he had held ever in view.

Even at this fateful crisis he felt there must be a right

way out of the tangle if only he could see it. That it might be granted to him to see it was his unuttered prayer as his blue eyes rested upon that mountain height—solitary yet secure, old as in Creation's dawn, time-scarred and worn, with the brand of countless summers and winters stamped indelibly upon its age-old face, yet destined by the will of its Creator to stand for countless æons to come, when he and his generation, and countless future generations, should moulder in the dust beneath its overshadowing height. If but he could see his way clear, if but it would be granted to him to see the right, was his unspoken petition.

But now the issues were tangled and confused. His country called for his service, and he felt it an irresistible call. He judged no man who remained deaf to that call, sufficient it was for him that to his ears the call had come, carrying conviction to his soul. In his mind there was no thought of the belligerents, of Boer or Briton. There was alone the need and the call. She, his beloved mother-land, *his country*—she suffered invasion, she called for the help of her sons; she called for his individual help and he felt himself ardently longing to serve her in her peril—to undergo hardships and perils, to risk life and limb, if need be, for the sake of that mother-land whose forces had silently enwrapped and surrounded him as he was borne forward into being; whose skies and winds and mountain-tops, and vast, wide, primitive wastes had moulded and influenced him even from pre-natal days. Was it for him to turn a deaf ear to this call of his Earth-world? Could a man ever be wrong in giving his life for his country? The strict obligations of patriotism were in his eyes obvious duties incumbent upon every man, sacred as were the old-world truths of the simple religion he had accepted as a boy from the lips of his mother.

That mother—a saint in the eyes of the son who worshipped her memory! He recalled her oft-repeated request, his oft-given promise in those last days of her life—"Help your sister"; and again, "Always stand by

Margery, my boy " ; . . . Or it would be Thane, " Don't let him get into bad ways when I am gone ? "

What counsel would she give him at this crisis ? Would it be " Thane and Margery ? " or would it be " Country and duty ? " She it was who had taught him the ideal of duty—that ideal to which he now looked so persistently, clung so firmly. He longed for her voice, her counsel, her inspiration. He prayed, consciously now, that she might be permitted to breathe her soul into his—to enlighten his darkness, to strengthen his soul.

With the thought of strength came once more the association with the mountain-tops. Again, this association working in his mind gradually cleared the mists of the past, and he saw himself—a lump of a boy with a thick tangle of shining hair just touching his shoulders—pressing against the side of his young mother as she sat on the back verandah, his eyes fixed on the pages of an open book that rested on her skirts ; a flat, black book with verses, each verse beginning with figures and capitals. He knew it now. It was a little book of Psalms. His mother had given it to him at the last, and he had since always carried it in an inside breast-pocket of his coat.

His fingers felt for the pocket and he touched something hard—the board covers of the little psalm-book. He drew it from its hiding-place and gazed upon the shabby black cloth binding. In it he saw his mother's face and form, heard her voice and felt her presence.

* * * *

She was beside him and they were on the back stoep. . . . He could hear Thane's baby voice shouting to Margery and Aletta, and to little Jo as they chased each other about the garden . . . His mother was pointing with her needle to the words in the open book as it lay on the big kitchen-apron she always wore of a morning . . . A boy's voice, clear and vigorous, was repeating word by word, with little drawls and breaks, something about

looking up to the mountains for help . . the boy, he knew in some mysterious fashion, had thought it a jolly good idea . .

Now a faint smile crossed his troubled face, for in a bound he had solved the association of mountain-tops and help. Mechanically he opened the little book and turned the well-thumbed pages until he found what he sought. Here were the words lingering in his memory from those far-off happy days of his boyhood. As his eye took in the opening sentences, the familiar words of the short, sweet psalm came back with a rush to his mind. It was his mother's musical, bell-toned voice—the gift she had passed on to her daughter—that was again repeating slowly, word by word, for his guidance :

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help.

"My help cometh from the Lord which made heaven and earth.

"He will not suffer thy foot to be moved ; He that keepeth thee will not slumber."

* * *

The little boy was looking up at the mother ; the mother was looking down on the little boy. Her needle pointed to the words as, one by one, she repeated them slowly and distinctly in those deep, clear tones sounding still in his ears. He could see the shape of the earnest, down-bent face, the dark, straight brows shading the blue eyes, the red lips—opening and closing—could exactly recall the colour of the spotted print dress, almost covered by the big apron :

"The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil ; He shall preserve thy soul.

"The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth and even for evermore."

* * *

The little boy was asking questions of the mother. "What is my soul ?" . . . "What sort of help does the

mountain-top give a fellow?" . . . "Will it make me strong to fight if I look up—so?" . . . And again, making strong assertions: "God could never love you so much as I do, Mums—no one could—not even father." Or—"Of course I'll always have *you* to ask about things being right or wrong, so that I can tell Margery and Thane." The mother was answering the little boy's questions: "Yes, do you see World's View? Look up to it when you are in trouble, and it will help you to be strong." "A man must be very brave and strong—afraid of nothing but of doing what is wrong." And again, "I shall always be very near to my little boy . . . though you should not see me, and should think, perhaps, that I am far away, look at the old mountain there and then you will be leaning against my shoulder—as near to me as you are now" . . . "If you look up to the mountain, you are looking up to God, and He will help you to bear your pain, or trouble, whatever it may be."

* * *

His mother had not deceived him. He had been led to this solitary communion with nature, he had "lifted his eyes to the hills," and a vision had been granted him which had brought to him not only renewed strength and courage but that most precious help and comfort of spiritual intercourse with the beloved mother who had passed "beyond the veil." His mother's words had been amply justified; he had looked up to the mountain-top, and the Creator of the Universe had caught that upward glance, had felt that unspoken appeal, and had led him in his hour of anguish and sore unrest to comfort, and strength and help.

* * * *

From the deep trance into which he had sunk, oblivious of his surroundings, he roused himself, replaced the little book in the hidden inside coat pocket, and slowly retraced his steps to the farmhouse. The rays of the newly-risen sun struck him full in the eyes. His little world

was awakening to the duties of the early morning. In the cattle-kraal the herdman, who had collected the lowing cows, was calling to the milkers to bring down the pails, and in response to his calls the boys came hurrying forth from the kitchen with a great clanking of buckets and tin pannikins; while the little chocolate-coloured piccanninies crept out from under their karosses in the huts and stood for a moment in the doorways, rubbing their beady black eyes not yet fully unclosed, before wending their steps in the direction of the calf-pen. In the stable George found Zimbene busily grooming the horses. His story was narrated with fullest details. He had been unable to find the young baas on the previous night; the young baas' room was empty; he had knocked and knocked; then Miss Margery had opened her window, and had taken the note and told him—Zimbene—to go home to his bed, for she would see that the young baas got the letter as soon as he came in.

Not altogether reassured by this tale, and resolving that later in the day he would return to his old home, George busied himself with the usual occupations of the hour until, the morning's work well over, he entered the house to find his mother-in-law's huge bulk filling up one side of the breakfast-table.

She greeted him in mournful tones but with a decidedly cheerful expression on her large, tallow-coloured face.

"Ach, then, haven't you heard, my son? Has Aletta not yet told you the sad news? Shame then, Letty, not to tell your man everything on the instant. Doesn't the Book teach you that man and wife are one?" She winked at the frowning Aletta; then turned again to George: "Oom Jan, my poor old man, seventy next birthday, if you'll believe me, *schoen-son*—well, he's up and off, gone into hiding where that *schelm* Bouwer, with his dirty papers, will never get at him."

"Gone into hiding, has he?" asked George, calmly.

"You must remember his great age—all but seventy," Aletta interposed, anxiously.

"Seventy," shrilled Tante Jacoba, bolting down her food, yet determined to tell her tale, "three-score-and-ten, which the Book says is the full age of man as a rule; but because the dear Lord has spared my old man to me is it to be believed that I am going to allow him to be marched off by means of a dirty piece of paper and *sjamboked* up to the very rifles of those *duivels* of Bushmen fighting our burghers? No, indeed! Why, I am told they carry short, sharp knives which they fix on to the point of their Martinis when they are going into a fight with our men, and so our poor *kerels* get run through—so!—stuck like a pig by the knife! Ach! then—so—there you are dangling on the knife at the one end of the *roer* and the *duivel* of a Bushman at the other end—so!" and the old woman made a terrible thrust with her breakfast-knife at an inoffensive pat of butter on the dish before her.

George smiled, despite his distraction, but Aletta turned white.

"Oh, don't make fun of it, *schoen-son*," implored his mother-in-law. "No doubt but I am nothing more than an ignorant old Boer woman, you will be thinking, but let me tell you this, I am looking all right after my old man. I've had the expense of burying one husband already—a young *kerel* who married me in my maiden days and then went and got his neck broken at some foolish horse-jumping business. Ach! but that was bad, and me not sixteen! *Toch! toch!* But that's past and over many, many years ago, thank the Lord, and I am now old and slim—very slim. This man of mine I am not going to bury, he's got to bury me; and not much expense either with the coffin all ready in the loft at du Bruyn's Rust, and our two daughters to make the funeral cakes and see to things."

Here she paused and gasped for breath, while George took the opportunity of asking whether Oom Jan was really off.

"'Jan,' I said to him yesterday morning," shrilled Tante Jacoba again, with a mighty gathering up of her

forces ; “ ‘ Jan,’ I said, ‘ off with you—now—at once ! ’ So he saddled up the old *schimmel*, and Jo and I stuffed his saddle-bags with *biltong* and cookies : ‘ There,’ said I, ‘ off with you into the *kranize*, and hide there with the baboons and the *wilde-kat*, for I don’t want to see your precious old face again till this *slecht* war is over and done with.’ And so he went off with his *roer* and his saddle-bags. Ach ! Ach ! but it’s a bad business, this war.”

“ But won’t the Boers catch him, Tante Jacoba ? ” George asked, slyly.

Tante Jacoba winked, openly this time ; but her voice when she replied was charged with the same ponderous gravity.

“ Not they ; they’ve got their work cut out—van der Merwe, Bouwer, and the rest of that gang—getting ready to fight the *rooineks*.”

“ But the Bushmen ?—they are not far off, you know ; Oom Jan had better not wander too far around shooting partridges.”

“ The *slechte* ! ” cried Tante Jacoba, angrily. “ What do *they* know of our veldt ? du Bruyn can play at hide and seek with them easily enough.”

“ And you, George,” inquired the old woman when she had drained her last drop of coffee, wiping, as she spoke, her huge mouth with the back of her broad, toil-worn hand and pushing from her the empty plate, cup and saucer. “ Is it true what Aletta tells me—that you join the *predikant* at Louw’s Krantz ? ”

“ I have promised to ride over and help him to get things into order there,” George replied, shortly.

Elbows on the clear space of table-cloth before her, Tante Jacoba sat silent for a moment or two, curiously studying her son-in-law. Then she heaved a vast sigh and said solemnly :

“ Ach, then, you will be in the fight—for there’s a fight, and a sharp fight, coming on. *Heer* ! but that’s bad ! May you be shielded from the godless Bushmen’s bullets,

and from those sharp, straight knives! Ach! Tch! tch! tch!"

"Ma," said her daughter sharply, as she rose abruptly from the table, "don't talk of these things. George must go and do his part as a man . . . and I have the harder part—the woman's part—to *let him go*."

She pushed aside her chair and left the room. Mrs. du Bruyn winked again across the table at her son-in-law.

"George," she said in a brisk, confidential tone dropping her assumed melancholy, "just listen to old Tante Jacoba who has known you ever since the hour you were born. Don't pay too much attention to what Aletta says; just ride over and see the Boer camp—then come back."

George smiled above the match he held in his hand ready to put to his pipe.

"I should like to see Aletta's face when she saw me back," he said, lightly.

"Ach! but what matter her face! It is the heart—the mind—not the face that will smile in the woman; in her spirit she shall lick your boots, *kerel*. It's when you come back you will see her pleased and puffed up. My word, boy, so you shall if—as the good Lord grant—no mishap befall her."

"But what do you mean?" asked George, suddenly aware that there was more in her enigmatic assertions than he had at first supposed.

"But only what every mother feels—that the want of a man-child is what frets a woman sorely. Don't we read in the Book that it fretted Hannah? Yes, indeed—and *it may be a boy this time*," Tante Jacoba added oracularly.


George stood looking searchingly into her face. Aletta's expectation—if indeed she had any such—was news to him. After a pause, he asked:

"Are you sure of this? . . . I had no idea——"

"Sure?" Tante Jacoba shrilled as she sniffed violently; then snorted and coughed and wagged her head indignantly. "Sure? Is the boy crazed that he asks such a question of his wife's own mother? Sure I am,

my son, though not in words has the girl spoken ; but a mother's eyes are sharp. I've seen, too, what you have had to put up with from her vagaries of late ; but pay no attention to her fads, George, pay no attention to her humours. For why—these are but Nature's signals to us ; and you mark my words, *schoen-son*, the girl will lick your boots with joy when you come back, having spent a few hours at Mynheer van der Merwe-and-Co.'s-Boer-Camp, and paid your best respects to the good pastor—so keeping faith with him and your given word, as a man is bound to do."

But George only smiled and nodded kindly at the old dame as, his pipe satisfactorily lighted, he went off to his work at the lands ; and the morning passed uneventfully by.



X

ALETTA stood in the poultry-yard scattering an apronful of grain to the clucking, cluttering cocks and hens gathered around her skirts, busily engaged in scratching at and picking up the corn and maize thrown about the grass-plot of the run.

All around the precincts of the peaceful, out-of-the-way farmhouse, Nature smiled in the crisp, cold air of the winter afternoon. Johanna, who leaned listlessly against the gate leading into the enclosure, stared up at the tall, wide-spreading cypress standing solitary against the red-bricked building. Pigeons were cooing among its dark, wide branches, while from further afield she could catch the short, sharp, joyous bark of the dogs returning with their master and the men from their day's labour at the ploughing of the fields, and the distant lowing of the homing cattle bellowing expectantly for their stalled calves. Pigs grunted, turkeys gobbled, the fowls kept up a continuous clutter, and in the eucalyptus and syringa trees thousands of yellow finches flew from branch to branch and twittered and sang of their loves and nesting happiness.

Something of that spirit of content and jubilation in all dumb creation was conveyed so clearly by these creatures of the wild to the lonely soul of the sorely-tried girl that, as her dark eyes gazed intently at the tree-tops, black discontent and bitter impatience filled her heart and mind. Wrapped in her own dark thoughts, she failed to

hear Aletta's stream of talk wafted across the poultry-run.

"Thinking of that *duivel*, I'll be bound," said her sister angrily, coming up to her. "I've called to you half-a-dozen times to push the gate tighter; there! that's the third that's crept through! . . . shoo . . . shoo . . ."

"I'd be 'shamed if I were you, Jo, to sit with my head in the clouds grieving for a man who had treated me like dirt," went on Aletta scornfully, when the escaping chickens had been shepherded back within the run; "making all this trouble over a godless traitor like Thane Brandon."

"He's no traitor," interrupted Johanna proudly, "and my trouble is my own, so you need not put yourself out about it."

For some moments Aletta looked hard and thoughtfully at her sister; then in a softer manner she said as she turned away:

"Don't let us quarrel over the man, Jo; how you ever came to love so ill-tempered a *kerel* puzzles me . . . it was a misfortune."

"Love comes like the wind, no one knows how or whence," the younger sister repeated dully, her eyes again on the tree-tops. How they rocked! like cradles, in which lay tucked fluffy little nestlings, over which the parent birds carolled their songs of home and love and happiness.

"Girls are fools who let men make up to them," counselled Aletta gravely.

"—if they don't seize the opportunity to tie them," added Johanna.

"That often means that a girl's left tied only to shame," her sister said in tones of warning.

"The child binds the man," the other replied obstinately.

"Soh—well, we two together may play a trick on those who maybe think to do us a bad turn. Mind, though, Jo, no secrets from me, and I'll stand by you, come what may."

She turned, and went back to the flock of fowls, still scratching in the hope of more grain ere being turned in to the roosting-sheds, leaving Johanna to digest her somewhat cryptic utterance and offer of assistance.

Her brother-in-law came up to the gate, and nodding to him the girl walked slowly away.

"I am going down home," he said, addressing his wife. "Will you come, Aletta?"

She shook her head decidedly.

"I'm no welcome sight there just now," she called back, sending her full, heavy tones across the intervening space of the poultry-run, "and the talk of the men in the bar and on the stoep irritates me . . . Fools! Can't they talk less and fight more?" she added, dropping her voice to a contemptuous query.

"You are always welcome," her husband returned calmly; "but please yourself."

"And you would leave me again to a lonely evening?" she asked, her tones rising reproachfully.

"You have your mother and Jo."

"Ma has gone home; and Jo—what company is she, eating her heart out for a man who has wronged her."

George opened the gate and joined her. Half afraid of her words, she made a great pretence of hustling her flock to their appointed roosting-sheds. Her husband stood in silence until the last straggler had been housed, then asked quietly:

"Why did you not tell me you had Bouwer here last evening?"

She evaded his question.

"How did you hear it?—through Zimbene—the black spy."

"Zimbene is no spy," he said coldly; despite his wish, he felt that his tones were cold.

"Ach, then, it is surely Jo? She has been babbling to Thane as usual. Thane has told Margery, and Margery has passed it on to you; I saw her ride by to the lands to-day—she didn't turn in to greet me."

Her instincts had divined the facts of the case, but George neither confirmed nor denied her statement.

"She had the Captain—the Boer prisoner—escorting her," Aletta continued; "he seems greatly attracted by her; I have noticed that before when they have been here together; I suppose they will make a match of it."

"I don't see why you should suppose that."

"Don't you? Well, it does not concern me so long as Margery doesn't interfere between Jo and Thane."

Her husband turned from her, but she followed him. A grievance of long standing with Aletta was the *idée fixe* she harboured that her husband shared with his sister some secret knowledge hidden from his wife.

"George, you know how it is with those two," she said imploringly. "Jo has taken him as her man; surely he will wed her before the pastor."

"As to that, Thane must decide for himself," her husband's tones were now decidedly chilly. He was displeased at her vague threat against Margery, and wondered uneasily how near to the real facts were her suspicions of the dark secret in his sister's life.

"George, you speak coldly—cruelly. She is my only sister, and I love her—you have influence over Thane."

"I have none," returned her husband emphatically; "not since my decision to join van der Merwe. . . If I am detained—if I am driven into a fight"—his honest blue eyes searched her face. "What was Bouwer wanting here, Aletta?" he asked again.

"Only to see the old people," she exclaimed hastily, horrified as Jo's position became clear to her. If her husband had lost all influence over his brother—if Thane's hatred towards the Boers, because of the part she flattered herself she had persuaded his brother to take in the conflict, remained implacable, what was left to her sister but desertion and loss of the man she desired above all else? Angered against her people, embittered towards the brother he loved, Thane Brandon, she felt, would never again turn to Jo.

Aloud she said :

"Poor Jo! it's hard on her . . . another woman's life ruined by this cursed war! Oh, the bitterness, George, that it will leave for years to come between your people and mine! I feel so miserable when I think of it—the long trail of years stretching ahead in the land, with the children yet unborn who will be born with the hate for their fellow-Afrikaners implanted in their young hearts because of the strife of to-day—the thought is so sickening that I could almost wish for death to ease my mind of the burden it brings to my heart."

"Don't dwell on it," he replied, with gentle command in his tones as he remembered her mother's suggestion, "keep about in the open air as much as possible while I am over at the camp; and, Aletta—" he turned to her with a keen look in the deep-set blue eyes, a look she understood and bowed before—"don't encourage Bouwer's visits."

"Visits!" she exclaimed, indignantly, "he has come but once unknown to you—last evening; he came on here not finding the old people at home. He won't come again. Why should he?"

Eyes and voice challenged him; her husband merely nodded.

"And he arranged to allow your father to go off?"

She shrugged her broad shoulders.

"He didn't find *him* here. Pa went off earlier in the day, as my mother told you."

George made no comment though he understood, and his wife divined that he understood, the arrangement which had been entered into with Bouwer whereby his arrival at the camp would cover his father-in-law's defection. To this arrangement he felt not the slightest objection, but that Bouwer should have been the one to grant the favour to his wife rankled somewhat. Of this, however, he made no sign, merely remarking as he moved away: "I shall not be long."

As he passed on his way down the hill, Jo, who had

wandered towards the spur of the mountain-side that overlooked the post-house, called to him. He raised his eyes and saw her standing above him, bare-headed, with clasped hands.

"George, give my love to Margery."

"Yes, I will," he replied.

"Tell her not to nurse her anger against me."

He nodded, knowing there was something behind. Johanna came nearer, stepping lightly between the boulders half-hidden by the dried herbage and scrub covering the hard, rocky soil. Looking up at her, as she slithered like some agile, graceful panther over the rugged mountain-side, the young man could see her dark eyes—no longer slumbrous and love-laden but alive with a restless, consuming passion, wild with an unfathomable dread. She slid to the ground on the edge of a projecting spur immediately above him and knelt, with slim brown fingers pressing upon the dried carpet of the rank, dun-coloured grass and scrub, staring down intently into the soft blue of his uplifted gaze.

"George," she implored. "Why, *broerijé*—why seek to mix yourself up in a trouble that does not concern you? Oh, George! stay with us so long as they let you alone, and then—when the summonses come—slip away with Thane; *that* won't be many days hence," she added, despondently, "but he knows—thank the Lord—he knows!"

"How does Thane know?"

"But, of course, I told him," she replied, simply.

"You give away Bouwer's secrets—your people's secrets, Jo?" George said, gravely.

"To Thane—yes: I would give away my soul if that would help him."

He looked compassionately at the girl as she knelt above him, a lonely figure on the wild grey waste, a very incarnation of the intensest love of woman animated and consumed by that half-divine, soul-searing breath of passion—so rare a gift to mortals, so undesirable to the

ordinary conditions governing this prosaic life. A sudden sense of deepest pity for her filled his heart, and for the first time he saw as in a flash of sudden enlightenment the difference between Aletta's love for himself and this wild, dominant passion called forth by his brother from the impassioned soul of her sister.

"Think, George," Johanna implored, stretching out a hand as though in supplication, "think of the sorrow your going to join the Boers will bring on them—down there," she pointed to the post-house—"your father is an old man, his heart wrapped up in his first-born son; would you kill him with cruel suspense and anxiety and shame?—yes, *shame*, George, for he holds it black shame that you should be in the company of men armed against England. And Thane holds it black shame also . . . and Margery—poor girl—she does not care about Boer or Briton, only about you, *broertjie*; would you bring heavy sorrow on her heart? Is it right to treat your people so? And—" her voice faltered, then grew deeper—"and if I am worth considering, George, think, *toch!* think of me, of my trouble which—" she added impressively—"would be no trouble at all if only you do not join the Boers."

"What difference would my joining make to you?" he asked, in some doubt as to the implication conveyed by her last words.

"What difference, do you ask, George Brandon?" she shrilled, in a flash of wild anger and misery caused by the apparent callousness of his question, "just the difference there is between the rapture of the saint in heaven and the suffering of the sinner in hell!—just the difference between the joy and the bliss and the deep, unspeakable happiness of the redeemed in Paradise, and the anguish and horror and the gnawing-of-the-worm-that-never-dies of the lost in torment—certain of their everlasting portion of woe—of their doom of despair—*lost to hope!* That's the difference it will mean to me, George. I shall have lost my last hope . . . for hasn't Thane sworn on his word—before his God—yes,"—she turned ghastly white and

trembled and swayed, "sworn even—by the memory—of—his—mother," she faltered, each word falling slowly.

"Sworn what?" George asked, and his voice too, was low and troubled.

"To give me up," she cried, miserably, "to give me up *if ever you join the Boers.*"

At this fresh complication in the situation, this fresh obstacle in the path of his duty, the young man felt again the clutch of the toils in which the monster of strife and unrest had involved him. To Jo in her pain and misery what answer could he make? How refuse her prayer, which yet he was unable to grant?

"Jo," he said, after a pause, "you must think no more of Thane. If he loved you truly—loved you in the only way that could satisfy your heart—he never would have sworn that oath; my joining the Boers would not have made him love you less."

She sprang to her feet impatiently.

"Oh! go your ways! go your ways!" she cried, wildly. "If you were not always half-way up in the clouds with your notions of goodness and right and duty you would know better the strength of that bitter, cruel, human love which your brother has for you—so bitter and cruel to the one who has it in his heart when he falls out with the one he loves! Thane loves you, George, with this fierce love of man, passing the passionate love he bears to woman. That is how he loves you, and that is how I love him—cruelly, horribly, without pause, or rest, or ease from my cruel pain . . . You, with your soft, sweet nature and mild, gracious soul—you can't even understand such a love! ('Is it sent by God or the devil?') I ask myself, and I can't answer for I don't know whether it is a gift from heaven or hell . . . I only know—and I tell you, George—it's like this that a woman feels when she loves a man, she would welcome even death from his hands . . . yes, if he took her up and threw her into that still, dark pool lying down there"—she pointed towards the river-bed—"she would be content to let her flesh and her bones, her

softness and her beauty—all that made her dear to the man—rot, and moulder away down in that cold bed of darkness and slime and filth because it was *his* hand that threw her there ! ”

“ Jo ! ” remonstrated George, horrified by her looks and words which betrayed the unmistakable force and intensity of her ill-regulated, ill-starred passion : “ Jo—my poor girl——”

But she had turned swiftly away, and disappeared—swallowed up amid the grey patches of stone and bush covering the face of the rocky veldt—and he pursued his way in silence.

XI

AS he reached the footbridge, he came face to face with Thane. Strange, unfamiliar lines of care and unrest marked the strong, dark face with the heavy, threatening brows, stamping it with a haggard, unwonted air which told the tale of the hours of conflicting pain and fury and remorse through which the younger man had passed. Dark, brooding anger flashed from the black depths of his steel-grey eyes ; his mouth was set and hard.

The brothers looked intently at each other in a silence that seemed to either man age-long.

Then Thane spoke :

" I told Margery I'd never again set foot on the Top Farm till you'd come to your senses, George, yet I am fool enough to be on the way there to look you up."

" Thane, I am on the way to see you."

" Then let us talk things over here."

They remained on the bridge, their faces turned toward the downward flow of the stream where it raced around the huge, flat-topped boulder set in mid-current, below which lay the dark, silent, bottomless pool. Thane's massive frame dominated the narrow little structure as he stood firmly upright, his long legs planted widely apart, his hands dug deeply in the pockets of his smart crimson knitted waistcoat, a gift worked by the clever fingers of the luckless Johanna. His brother, stooping slightly, grasped with both hands the rough log side-rails of the rustic bridge.

Below, raced the darkened water from whose surface

the sunlight was gone, rippling in sweet cadences the ceaseless, harmonious babble of its haunting, echoing song ; above, stretched the calm dove-grey of the evening skies ; around, lay the inscrutable mystery of the long black shadows falling from the uplands and stretching, like mighty giants in their slumbers, across the bare, flat plain of the veldt-world.

"George," said Thane, unbosoming himself with a difficulty of effort comprehended alone by the brother to whom his rare childish confessions had been made, "I've never stooped to ask grace of any man living—yet I've trampled on my feelings and forced myself to the scratch, and here I am to talk over this damned war-business with you. Look here, old man, you must not join the Boers—no, you must not look them up at Louw's Krantz, not even for an hour."

"You make it harder, Thane," George said, patiently, "I feel I must do my share——"

"I can't reason with you about duty, George," his brother interrupted quickly, still with an effort keeping the rein on his rising fury and making his tones persuasive and conciliatory, "for your idea of duty is that you should go and help the Boers, mine that you should respect the blood in your veins and remain neutral in this tangle between England and the Transvaal. There's no use in arguing when two see a duty from different points of view. I can respect your motives and you can respect my views ; but, George, old man, *give it up—give it up.*" He stretched out a muscular, broad, sun-browned hand. "Do you mark that pool there into which you tumbled to defend my honour, George ? Well, I would willingly bury myself in the slimy, horrible grave yonder if that would stop you from your mad purpose !"

The signals of rising storm, tempestuous and ungovernable, were leaping and fusing in those dark, steel-grey eyes. As Thane spoke—shortly but passionately—George recognized the signs as indications of his true feelings in the matter. He recognized that these words

were no mere vain boasting on the part of his brother, felt the truth of their import and understood the intensity and bitterness by which Thane was animated, and again a sense of the thorny path he essayed to tread—the final heartrending reality of all that his decision involved upon those he held most dear—swept over him in a tide of irresistible, forceful and insistent appeal, renewing again within his mind and soul that hard conflict between country and home-ties, between his patriotism and filial and fraternal affections.

"George, you know me for no idle babbler . . . that, before our Maker, is how I feel this thing . . . For my sake, George, give it up . . . I stoop to ask you *for my sake.*"

It was his brother pleading to him—the brother whose proud nature disdained to ask anything of any man. Not another, but Thane—*Thane* for whom he would have given all he held dear.

And Thane was pleading—not for himself: George understood that, despite the words in which he had clothed his request—words which he considered the most likely to carry weight with the brother whose true affections he never could doubt. It was for *his* sake he was thus pleading, George understood—for his sake; because Thane could not bear the thought that the brother he held in such love, such honour, such high esteem, should act unworthily—should bring a slur upon his name; this it was which wrung from his proud heart and defiant lips the pathetic plea "*for my sake.*"

Like an echo from the spur of the headland came the wail of the woman's voice: "Think of me—of my trouble, which would be no trouble at all if only you do not go"; from the twinkling lights in the old homestead above the garden came the prayer of his father: "My boy, don't do this thing"; the cry of his sister: "My brother! my brother!"

As he heard each individual cry and appeal, as the thought of the suffering he was bringing upon each and

all of these loved ones—the closest and dearest to his affections—George Brandon's heart and nerve and courage and resolution suddenly failed him, and with a bitter word he told himself that he could not do this thing! Was he not indeed attempting more than mortal man—a mere atom in the mighty scheme of Creation—should undertake? Was it possible that a Father of infinite compassion, a God of infinite comprehension, would expect so unnatural a sacrifice from a creature of dust moulded in the common clay of our humanity, whose sole impulse towards the divine is reflected in the strong bond of human affection, in the close ties of family love knitting individual to individual, brother to brother? It could not be! His love of country had surely obscured for him the right path—the true duty! George Brandon reasoned fiercely in his pain and agony of mind, clutching at every straw sweeping down the stream of the perturbed current of his violent emotions as a drowning man might clutch at the straws gliding by upon the mighty current of the whirling cataract of waters sweeping him to his doom; and as he thus reasoned, clutching wildly at every passing doubt or vague supposition, his strong, true patriotism, his high conception of duty, went perilously near to sailing down the wind.

His hands gripped hard at the uneven surface of the rough log-parapet, as with bowed shoulders he bent forward, his eyes fixed on the dark, unresting waters as though to gain strength and inspiration from the hurrying stream. Then he found himself attracted by the haunting melody of the voice of the stream, so like the murmur of some long-forgotten voice heard in the far-off early days when the spell of the unknown, the mystical and the ideal possessed and quickened the fresh, eager, idyllic spirit of the boy-child. He bent his head to catch the message of the stream. He heard no longer Thane's outpouring of burning entreaty. Over and over came the voice of the waters, conveying and repeating—now loudly, now softly, now in sonorous tones, then in gentlest

whispers, its brief, insistent message of the paramount claim of duty; of the obligation laid upon a man to follow the right.

He straightened himself; his course lay clear before him. That message, those words, suddenly spoken to his heart and soul, admitted of no misinterpretation. He no longer doubted as to his choice, he felt that he had chosen aright. The thorny path of duty lay before him, sacred now in his eyes. Should he evade it, he would be unworthy of his Saviour—the great Exemplar and Divine Master who, for love of humanity, had borne the Cross.

This was his appointed cross . . . Should he shrink from it?

Thane, looking into his eyes, read his purpose and fell back appalled and silenced.

George's arm was round the big, massive shoulder; his gentle blue eyes raised with pity, and love, and comprehension to those black, defiant brows; his right hand locked in his brother's as when, in the happy years of childhood, these two had fallen asleep together after the day's work and play—after, maybe, the whispered confession of naughtiness; the ready, generous response of forgiveness, or encouragement, or counsel, bringing happiness, peace, content to either little soul.

"Forgive me, old chap," George was saying, in a voice that pierced to the depths of Thane's fiercely-embittered heart. "A man must follow a duty when he sees it—or he would be unworthy his manhood—unworthy his Saviour," he added in a lower voice.

"George," his brother replied, in tones low and husky with repressed emotion; "your duty is to clear out with me. Listen; didn't Margery go over to the lands this morning with my message?"

"How came Jo to give away their secrets?" asked George, in return to the question.

"So you know all about it?" said Thane. "Yes, Bouwer's let the old man off on condition you turn up at the camp."

"I know," his brother replied.

"You'll regret it once, and that will be for always and ever—if you go," Thane said, impatiently.

"I must go ; but, Thane, spare Jo's womanhood . . . because she loves you, don't trade on that."

"Who's trading on it?" Thane interrupted, hotly. "Damnation ! hasn't it been to help *you* that I've stooped to this?" he questioned, savagely. "And hear what I have to say," he continued bitterly, dragging his arm free and turning away—then flinging himself round to gaze with cold, set face and dark, formidable brows into his brother's equally pale, equally suffering face ; "hear for the last time what I've got to say ! Don't think they aren't making a fool of you—Bouwer, Aletta, and the old people. Don't think they haven't got their plans ready cut and dried—that canting old parson and the lot of 'em ! I've warned you, but for some fad, some fetish, some damned nonsensical, one-sided view of this business you've turned a deaf ear to me—to all of us, and to all our prayers, and are heading straight for trouble. It's that cursed woman and her lot ! Don't tell me ! And don't think I'll sit tight while they goad you into this business ! Once you join the burghers, I'll join t'other lot and fight these bushveldt Boers to the bitter end—give 'em no quarter . . . Think me a brute, do you, George ? Maybe I am that, and worse, but it'll not be me but the very devil you'll put into me by going along with them."

With these hard words, savagely spoken ; these cruel utterances torn from his embittered heart and falling forcefully from his set, white lips, Thane jerked himself off the bridge and strode in blind rage up the pathway leading to the house, George following slowly.

■

XII

LATER on in the evening, as he recrossed the bridge on his return to his home, it was Margery who stood by his side, her hands industriously dusting imaginary specks from his coat-collar, her dimmed eyes averted.

"We had a scene this afternoon—here," George admitted in reply to her inquiries.

She smothered the deep sigh that rose from her labouring breast.

"I look to you, Margery dear, to help Thane through this trouble. Be very patient with him, dear."

"I'll see to him; don't you worry," she forced herself to speak cheerfully. Her face was calm as she kissed him on the lips.

"Well, so long." She tried to utter the words cheerfully, but they stuck in her throat, and her voice rang toneless and hollow. George caught the stifled anguish and his heart suffered consciously with hers. Both knew, both felt, the silent sorrow of the other—the hidden, unbearable pain.

"We shall see you . . . again . . . soon."

"As soon as I can manage it . . . So long, old girl."

She watched his tall form till it faded from sight, lost in the dim light of the evening shadows. He had spoken no word of farewell, had breathed no hint of parting, but intuitively his sister recognized that the hour was at hand, that this visit had been his farewell to his old home and his loved ones.

With a low outburst of her long-repressed agony of

mind, she clutched the rails of the bridge while the salt tears ran down her pale, worn face to fall into and mix with the unresting waters of the hurrying stream.

He had spoken no word of farewell, but she knew that he had gone from them; the being dearest to her soul, most precious to her existence, had left her to take his part in the uncertainties and perils of the sharp conflict drawing nearer day by day, increasing steadily in magnitude and might. What if harm befell him? . . . She pushed back the unbearable thought.

"I must see him again; I must!" She told herself he would leave on the morrow—probably at dawn; that he would take the bridle-path over World's View—the short cut to Louw's Krantz.

"Thane must see him . . . and—and—be pleasant," she vowed hotly. "I'll *make* him! It's a cruel shame; poor old George! going off like that—we'll start at daylight, and overtake him as he climbs the hill."

Comforted a little by the thought, she raised herself and put back the tangle of hair that had fallen about her wet eyes. Through the darkness a form advancing down the hill from the direction of the Top Farm startled her; it might possibly be her brother returning. She called softly:

"Is that you, George?"

"No." It was Woodward's voice that answered, and he came nearer, raising his cap as he spoke. Through the dim light her face—white, and worn and suffering—confirmed his reflections that the hour of parting was upon the family at the post-house. "I have just passed your brother," he added. "We had a little talk."

Something in his tones made her aware of his sympathy, and for the first time in his presence she spoke recklessly, openly, angrily:

"Oh, why are we made to suffer so horribly? Why should human beings be called upon to endure agony beyond power of mortal brain to bear? How hideous life is!"

The agony of her loss returned in full force upon her. Before her hard suffering Woodward stood mute. In the dim light—her tall figure bent and bowed, her eyes full of gloomy, smouldering anger and pain, her voice dull and bitter—she appeared to him the exponent of all the anguished, the grief-stricken, the suffering, the unblest among her fellows. In the face of such a grief—borne hardly, pressing directly upon her brain—he felt himself powerless, dumb-stricken !

She turned suddenly, and he walked by her side up the path-way and through the orchard, where the fruit-trees were bursting into bud and leaf. Soon these would don their loveliest hues beneath the burning kiss of advancing summer as it pressed upon the land like the passionate kiss of love pressed hotly upon youth. Yet now the garden lay barren, deserted, unlovely and unblest. He longed to breathe hope into this stricken, storm-tossed human heart, yet still he found no words.

"Life is thrust upon us," her voice was cold, and toneless, and hard, "we don't ask for it—we can't reject it—when at last we understand it is too late then, to say to the Giver 'No thank you.'"

"There are compensations," he ventured, gently, "you can't see them now—but you will—I am sure you will at some future."

"Why should you be sure?—that's all rubbish," she said, coldly. "And as for compensations, if by such you mean our friends—those we love, those dearest and most precious to our souls—these are not compensations . . . these are the very sources of our keenest agony, our greatest suffering ; for did we not love, we should never agonize."

He put out his hand and touched hers.

"You can't see it now ; how should you ?" he said, gently. "I can feel for your trouble," he added with low emphasis ; "you are called upon to bear a very heavy trial, though I hope not for long. Come, Miss Margery, don't reject my friendship ; let me help you through this bit of a bad time before you ; you can throw me over

when it is past and gone if you like," he concluded cheerfully.

— She made a faint movement to free her hand which lay imprisoned beneath his strong, warm pressure.

"Don't pity me . . . I must be hard—hard—or how shall I ever get through it?" She was thinking of the coming morning—the coming parting. "I—must—stand—alone," she muttered.

"No need for that: don't you think me a friend worth having?" he asked again. "Yes, you must accept my help: you may need a trusty, dependable fellow—one who will fetch and carry intelligently; I promise to obey your orders implicitly, whatever they may be."

They had reached the verandah, and she paused as though in thought, raising her eyes, deep-set and penetrating, to his face. Here indeed was the friend she so sorely needed. But dare she admit into her life so good a gift? Not for her own pleasure or benefit, but in case of need, to help her brother; this man she felt would prove a staunch helper and friend in trouble or necessity. She resolved no longer to repulse him.

"I believe you could be trusted; Babs thinks so and she generally knows," she said in tones a trifle less strained and cold; and with this grudging concession Woodward was forced to remain content.

XIII

WHEN Aletta stirred and opened her eyes shortly after daybreak she missed her husband from her side. She rose and drew on her stockings and striped petticoat; a woollen dressing-jacket completed her costume. She could hear George blowing at the fire in the kitchen. When she joined him there, the water was already bubbling in the big black kettle that hung over the leaping flames.

"Why did you get up, Aletta?" her husband inquired, turning his head as she entered and crossed the room. "It's a hard frost again, and bitterly cold. I would have brought you in a cup of coffee."

She took the coffee-pot from the shelf.

"I will make it, George, and fry the eggs and bacon. You must have a good breakfast—there's a long ride before you."

"Then I will see to the horse," he said briefly, and left the kitchen, while Aletta busied herself over the stove. No stab of agony pierced her mind, no heavy thought weighted her spirit. She was proud of the fact that her husband was at last starting forth to the help of his country, that he was riding to the burgher camp. Once there, and it was impossible but that he should take his share in the attack upon the Irregulars which the burgher leaders had planned.

Aletta's very love for her husband inspired within her the desire that he should take his share in this glorious work. She rejoiced because she was mated to a man and

not a skulker. How many among the Boer women who had taken to themselves men of English or Scotch nationality (and these were not a few) could boast of having sent their husbands to swell the Boer forces? She recognized her feat—accomplished in the face of the bitterest opposition from her husband's family—and was proud of it.

As to accident, she must be prepared for any such eventuality as might fall to the lot of any among the commando. If harm came to George, it would be the will of the Lord, and she would have to accept, and submit to, her share of the punishment He was sending upon the land and upon the people. Yet she felt any such danger as wounds or capture to be a very remote and unlikely contingency. Well able to evade the enemy by their superior knowledge of localities, the bushveldt Boers were more likely to ambush the Irregulars than to be entrapped by these foemen from the sister-continent—skilled in bush-craft though they were; hard riders, straight shooters, dauntless foes, worthy of their plucky adversaries.

She spoke cheerfully to her husband as he took his breakfast, and he replied composedly to her remarks. Their conversation touched chiefly upon the active business of the farm work, and it was abundantly evident to the young man's sensitive ear that his wife was far from expecting his immediate return. She dipped into the future—the completion of the ploughing of the larger fields—the crops to be sown. She had thought it all out—all could be done by this one or that, always excepting the master.

His heart within him was heavy, and oppressed by a sense of trouble. At all times, under the most favourable conditions, it is a wrench to a man to leave wife and loved ones for the scene of war, to exchange the peaceful surroundings of home for the din of camp life, the feeling of security among the familiar and the accustomed for the sense of lurking danger and peril in strange surroundings.

Yet how much more is the wrench accentuated when, as in the case of George Brandon, the faring forth to active service is unblest by farewell word from kith and kin, is heightened by the knowledge of sore and bitter trouble left behind in the hearts of those dear to him! His words were few, his voice low and strained—anxiety, sorrow, heaviness held him by the throat, and he rose abruptly from the table, leaving Aletta loudly bewailing his lack of appetite.

"You have such a long ride before you . . . it is such a cold morning. . . Ach, then! see, I have put some rusks in your pocket . . . don't forget to eat them by and by."

She followed him to the stables, a shawl thrown over her head, and watched him as he put the saddle on the sturdy bay. "Roona, carry your master well," she said, patting the shining flanks. Outside the stable, as they stood together, she laid her hand on the reins. "I'll hold him while you fill and light your pipe," for the cold made the horse restive. But George shook his head and his wife understood, perhaps for the first time, something of the depth and intensity of her husband's feelings. She looked at him as though afraid: "But—George—why?" she questioned in lowered tones; "*there is no one dead!*"

Only the death of a very near relative—a father, or wife, or child—was, according to Aletta's views as a typical Boer woman, of sufficient importance to withhold from a man the solace of his beloved pipe, to demand of him the unlit clay reposing coldly in the pocket of his corduroys! No word, no action on the part of her husband could have filled her with so startling a realization of what this faring forth to join the ranks of his brother burghers meant to him as this start in the bitter cold of the early morning without the warm-breathing consolation of the familiar pipe.

"No, little woman, I don't feel like it this minute—later on, perhaps," George replied, a faint smile dawning on his face at her words. He turned to her and put his arm about her. Dropping her hold of the reins she clung to him.

Enveloped in the shadowy greyness, husband and wife stood alone together. About them nature slept ; around them stretched the slumbering earth-world. Before them, through the gloom, shone the light from the kitchen window, indicating the home, the nest where she would lie snug ; behind, rose the mountain height over which he must travel to an unknown future.

"I—I—you will soon be back, my husband—and I shall be so proud of you."

Her heart, even beneath his parting kiss, glowed with exultation at the thought of the task to which he was going. Patriotism stirred the sluggish blood in her healthy, glowing body ; the placid spirit within her was unusually animated ; she had no thought of possible mishap to George.

"Good-bye," was all he could say. He had no such exultation of feeling. He was doing what he conceived to be his duty, but his depression was great, the sense of heavy trouble weighed down his habitual cheerfulness. His voice faltered over the simply-expressed farewell, then he steadied it to its former composure : "Take care of yourself, little woman ; and have Jo or your mother with you . . . so long, dear."

He had swung himself into the saddle, had gathered up the reins, and now guided the capering Roona round the corner of the stables along the lane leading to the cart-track. Then a quick gallop of hoofs on the high road told her that her husband had gone from her and from their mutual home to play the part allotted him by fate. Now she could catch the sound of the ringing hoofs but faintly, and knew that horse and rider had rounded the first bend in the curving track. She drooped her head ; then raised it proudly. "God ! I have given a man to the Cause ! Have mercy, and send him back safely to his wife." Then she turned, went indoors, and so back to her bed and slumbers.

But George, dismounting at the first bend in the road as it swept round the base of the mountain, diverged into the bridle-path which at this point followed directly the upward slope of the height. The path was narrow and rugged, cut through the thick bush which clothed the higher levels of the mountain, and it was over rough stumps and charred roots hidden by the rank grass and trailing creepers that he led the reluctant Roona. Under a wall of shadows from the dense bush on either side of the bridle-path, up and up the steep rise, man and horse tramped slowly. Daylight was approaching and it grew brighter with each passing moment. The stirring of bird and beast and insect life could be heard in the fastnesses of the wooded thicket through which the track ran. A herd of deer, seeking the water below, emerged from the bush and crossed the bridle-path before again plunging into the undergrowth. "What a splendid shot!" thought the young man, trying to divert his mind from the oppressive burden of thought that lay heavy upon it. Pulling at Roona's bridle he climbed steadily upward through the long, brown grasses and thorny, trailing growths; over the stumps, and half-concealed boulders, and moss-grown stones. Up the narrow, rugged track man and horse moved dim and ghostlike until, on the rising ground, the mists around them began to clear. Then through the tree-tops the brightening heavens looked down with promise of a fair day.

George thought of his interrupted ploughing—of his spring crops, of the later and more important summer harvest. The agricultural portion of the Brandon property lay chiefly on the Top Farm, around the slopes of the hill side, and the care of this important pastoral industry fell to the elder brother's share. The absence of the farmer at this particular time would ruin both the early and later seasons' crops; for in the absence of the master, the native servants, however faithful and willing they might be, would fail through incompetence to carry on the necessary work to a successful conclusion. Aletta,

no doubt, would see to the lands immediately adjoining the Top Farm homestead ; but would Thane superintend the work of those more extensive lands further afield ? For the sake of the successive crops of maize and wheat, of barley and oats to be gleaned with the coming harvests, George devoutly trusted he would not be detained for long from his property.

His thoughts centred on the obdurate, implacable Thane. He was taking this business so hardly. He remembered his brother's violence of temper, his indomitable will, his strong, unbending nature, his inflexible pride ; remembered, also, with a pang of pity, the rare devotion and unselfish affection which animated that wilful, masterful soul, and his heart softened towards Thane, and the struggle again stirred to life within his mind. For Thane's sake ought he to turn back—to take no part in the defence of his country ? But again the consciousness that it was his duty to share in the perils and hardships of this endeavour, swept over him. He pulled resolutely at the bridle and moved on.

He had reached the opening in the bush and now emerged on to the bare, level, boulder-piled summit where World's View reared high its topmost peak. He cleared the last of the overhanging mass of trees with their tangle of climbing plant-life and dense, thorny undergrowth, and now before his vision lay mile upon mile of plain, rolling east and west, north and south, on all sides to the utmost limits of the horizon. Remote and melancholy, the scarred, passionate face of the veldt lying in the dim light of the breaking day appeared to him as though stamped with the sufferings of her sons who suffered from the presence of the Monster of War pressed upon the face of the land. When should come the hour of deliverance ? All around, awakening Nature—unperturbed by the presence of armed forces whose blood daily watered the soil—started the pulses of her mighty machinery. The sky was turning roseate ; lines of blurred gold, and crimson, and purple streaked finger-prints across the bare

expanse of an as-yet-unwritten-upon firmament ; the fur and feathered tribes rustled and twittered.

As he stood by the side of the panting Roona, the sound of voices was wafted to him from below. He listened intently, then flung the bridle over Roona's head and turned back to the pathway through the bush from which he had just emerged. Through the rare, still air of the morning he could catch the note of a human voice. His thoughts turned to his brother. World's View was, as Babs had proudly informed Woodward, sacred to the use of the Brandons alone. At this early hour no one but Thane would be climbing the mountain-path. Had Margery persuaded him into so doing ? His heart, filled with a wild desire to see his brother once again, beat high with new hope. He strained through the dense patches of bush. Now he could see something white fluttering at intervals between the trees. It was a woman's skirts.

Margery's figure turned the bend. She was breathless, her steps dragged wearily, a basket hung on her arm. She lifted her eyes to where her brother stood blocking the narrow path, and he was horrified by her aspect. Her eyes were dull and sunken, her face haggard and careworn, her voice hollow and broken. "George, I have been calling—and calling," she said, faintly.

"Margery !" he exclaimed in astonishment. He took the basket from her and helped her up the ascent, scolding her gently. "You shouldn't have come—you know you should not have come out in the cold and dark—it must have been quite dark when you left home."

She nodded speechless, grasping his arm.

"And in this thin dress ! Where is your cloak ? "

Her shawl had been torn from her shoulders by the outstretched boughs of the thick bush, and she had not felt conscious of her loss. To her brother's question she made no reply. They had reached the summit and she sat down on a boulder, covering her face with her hands as she drew long, deep breaths, struggling with her strangled sobs. George stood by her in silence, unable in this

moment of parting to speak those words of bald consolation which he felt could bring but hollow comfort in her sorrow.

Roona cropped at the blackened herbage, while the first blinding shafts of light heralded the uprising of the sun. When Margery spoke it was with pauses between her short, broken sentences: "I could not sleep—George—I put something in a basket—food for you—and waited till daylight—I knew you would take the bridle-path—it's shorter."

"Margery dear, you shouldn't have attempted it."

She held her head bent.

"It's stupid of me—but, George, it's *so* hard to let you go! I've no one but you, and—and I'll miss you so. . . You see we've never been parted, except when I was away at school."

George nodded; he could not speak.

"And I've got spoiled, I suppose—always having you to turn to. It's selfish of me, but—" her voice dropped—"God! how hard it is to let him go!" she muttered.

"Selfish! you! That's rot, Margery," George said, thickly.

A smile passed, like a gleam come and gone in an instant, across the white face.

"I would have been with you at the first bend—I meant to meet you there. I thought we could have climbed old World's View together—as we have done so often—hundreds and hundreds of times, I suppose. Can't you see us, George, two little dots climbing up hand in hand . . . talking, always talking . . . up . . . up . . . and then two bigger children—a girl and boy, and a smaller boy to be helped up between them. . ."

"Don't, Margery."

"Oh, George, I can't help being selfish—just this once . . . Yes, I have suffered, as you know, but I have set my teeth and said: 'I will bear it alone' . . . and I have borne it. . . I could bear it *because I had you*."

"Hush, dear; God will spare me to you."

"No," she said in cold, quiet, despairing tones. "Why

should He? Those who are not much missed are the spared; those who are the all-in-all to some one are the ones to go. Isn't that *life*? Don't let us stuff ourselves with lies, however sweet. The world won't change for us, dear! life is cruel—unbearable!"

Again he stood silenced before her grief.

"I would have been with you at the bend, George," she continued, speaking now with a return to tones of simple explanation, "but I was hindered by Thane."

"What of Thane?" asked her brother in a low voice.

"I left Babs sleeping," she began, irrelevantly as it seemed. "I stole out of the house down the garden. Crossing the bridge I got a fright—a great, black figure stood on the bank opposite, staring down into the bottomless pool—at first I took it for the ghost—then I thought it might be a native—but it was Thane."

"Oh, God!—not Thane!—you did not leave him there?" George cried, hurriedly.

"I could not do that, dear. I remembered your words: 'Help Thane through.'"

"Thank God for that, Margery."

"I went up to him. . . I begged of him to come with me—last night I had begged and prayed of him to come——"

"He refused——"

"He would not . . . he said, 'Climb your Calvary alone—you women enjoy that sort of thing. As for me, I'll not see George again if he persists in going off to the Boer camp,' so I left him at the first bend in the road; he's waiting there."

"It's hard on us both." Her brother's voice moved her.

"You must not let it worry you, George; he'll come round in time to understand and see that you could not have acted otherwise."

"Margery, it is hard—how hard you alone know."

"I know, dear," she interrupted eagerly. "I know just what we are to you."

"To go off—not knowing what lies before one—is a trial

for any man ; but to leave as I am leaving—feeling that Thane hates me for going—without a word from him to wish me ‘ Good luck,’ or ‘ God speed ’—that—seems—more—than—I—can—bear,” he added, slowly.

“ Thane loves you, dearest.” She grasped for words to send him off comforted a little in spirit ; for words that might carry consolation for him as he rode on his lonely way. “ He takes your going so hardly just because his love for you is the deepest passion that has touched his big, stubborn heart. His love for you is there, George—that never can be lost to him. . . Mother used to say it would be his salvation—you remember.”

“ Margery,” he said suddenly, speaking more hopefully, “ what you say makes me feel certain that my going like this—in all this trouble and misery—is just to help Thane—somehow—somewhere—to help him to his true self.”

Some faint reflection of the inner joy the thought brought to him lighted the strong, thoughtful face, unmarred in its noble, manly beauty by any single line of selfish indulgence or mean desire. Margery, looking intently into those deep-set, gentle, pure blue eyes, felt her heart die within her. Her brother, she felt, had grown, even within the last few days, immeasurably beyond the reach of ordinary sinful mortals.

“ All is for the best, dear . . . we must never forget that . . . you will see it, Margery, and remember my words.”

The faintness of death came upon her. Margery Brandon had suffered much and intensely, and was doomed to yet more suffering ; but it was in this moment of an unspeakably-bitter farewell that the Crown of Sorrow laid its imperishable touch upon her—searing her soul, maddening her brain, torturing all the nobler elements of her nature.

Suddenly she found herself wishing herself alone. As though he divined that ardent longing, her brother was saying :

“ I must be getting along . . . thanks for the scoff, old

girl ; it will come in fine," he was busily transferring the contents of the basket to his saddle-bag, and it was his sister's firm, capable hands that now held and patted the smooth coat of the big bay.

"Babs made the toffee for you last night," her lips were white, her eyes dull and sunken, but her tones clear ; "she meant to give it to you to-day—so I put it in."

"Give her a kiss for it."

"She'll be glad you've got it."

"And tell father I'll soon be looking you up."

"I'll tell him."

"And Thane—get him to talk to you . . . it will help him."

"Yes, I'll look after him—after them all—Aletta and the farm work included . . . don't you worry."

"Well—hurry home, Margey."

"Y-e-s."

"You won't stay about in the cold ; promise me."

"I'll go at once."

Then there remained no more to be said. . . She waved to him as she slipped back into the bush-path, the empty basket hanging on her arm, and he raised his right hand holding aloft the short, thick *sjambok* he carried, in reply. Then the summit hid brother from sister and each descended the slope on opposite sides of the mountain. Margery paused but once in her descent, and that was to wipe the moisture which, despite the cold of the morning, had gathered on her brow.

In the moment of her farewell to her brother, she had cast her sorrow from her as she might have cast from her presence some loathsome, unclean thing, leaving her heart empty of all else but that last loving service for him. Now she reached out after it, caught at it, and hugged it to her bosom : she gloated over it, looking in the face of her immeasurable agony of suffering as a mother might look—with the concentrated gaze in which anguish and joy, agony and rapture is mingled—upon the face of her dead infant. A feeling of desolation swept over her, and she

welcomed it with a passionate intensity that numbed the sting of her pain. Anguish beyond power of expression seized upon and took possession of her, the violence of which was such that she felt herself to be unspeakably degraded by the sensation. Before this devil of overpowering, unbearable pain she felt she could not stand upright . . . she was on her knees grovelling before an all-masterful force. She was overwhelmed by Sorrow's humiliating touch . . . lost in a dark abyss of despair . . . beaten down . . . trodden upon . . . tortured !

Some suffering may raise, but the suffering of a long and bitter and hopeless fight against the worst blow that fate is about to deal us can but degrade as that blow falls in fullest force and severity. With all the strength of her vigorous womanhood she rejected as hideous the doctrine of the travailing and groaning in pain of the whole Creation ! She was fierce in her revolt against the tyranny that ordained suffering as the mate of love. Why is love given to us ? Only that we may agonize, her heart responded bitterly. Who gives us the power to love ? The Father who gives us the power to agonize. And through it all her mind was sensitively alive to, and conscious of, that awful sense of degradation which had touched and mastered her. Her bold, defiant spirit had trembled and cowered before this merciless demon of Pain. He had scourged her, and she had knelt beseechingly to him ; then she had embraced him—had grovelled before this all-masterful force, this dominating pain, this angel of darkness, by name, Suffering.

Suffering it was that had taken the comeliness from her face, the light and beauty from her eyes, the freshness and vigour from her frame ! It had robbed her of her womanly graciousness, her womanly rights—the rights life owed her as a human being, as one among the mothers of men. It had filched from her in her earliest prime the joy of living, had undermined all the nobler elements of her character, had hardened and embittered her nature, and now, finally, had degraded her soul.

She felt its rude, coarse touch still laid upon her naked soul, and shuddered and trembled as though that coarse, defiling touch were laid upon her bared flesh, degrading and besmirching her womanhood.

She agonized—but could not reason; she could but struggle in the grip of her sensations. For to her had been allotted that most disastrous of all faculties—the power to feel intensely.

XIV

IT was the Sunday following George Brandon's departure, and, since early morning, armed Boers, in larger or smaller parties, had been riding up to the doors of the post-house, calling for food and drink on their way to join the daily swelling commando camped at Louw's Krantz. One party alone came from that direction, this being the recruiting sergeant and his patrol.

The indefatigable Bouwer, with an attempt at geniality, served the long-expected summons upon the younger Brandon. Thane, as a burgher of the Republic, was to report himself at the camp within twenty-four hours, in default of which he might expect to be court-martialled, tried, condemned, and shot as a renegade and traitor to his country.

With a flicker of his strong, brown hand, Thane tossed the summons disdainfully in his old comrade's face. Bouwer's brow darkened. "If you were not so old a friend, Brandon——" he muttered angrily.

"You would do—what?" asked Thane, insultingly, loudly.

The Boers from the adjacent stoep crowded into the room, eager to witness the fray, ready to back their countryman against one of the accursed blood of their hated foes. "*Heer!*" muttered one man to his companion. "It seems to me that it would be as well for us to shut this *kerel's* mouth; he'll be in league with the enemy before all's said and done."

The barman trembled, foreseeing trouble. A new-

comer to the country, his knowledge of the *taal* was limited ; but he plainly perceived mischief towards the reckless Thane in the fierce, murderous glances bestowed upon him by the sullen Boers. He pushed his way in between the two men, apologizing on the score that he was wanted in the dining-room.

There he found Margery assisting old Lisbeth to set out a repast for the latest arrivals.

"For God's sake, miss," he gasped, "come and stop 'em, or they'll be murdering Mister Thane."

Margery, without a word, moved swiftly down the passage and pushed open the door leading into the public *zit-kamer* and bar. An air of dense blue smoke hung over the apartment, through which she perceived the two men facing each other.

"You've dragged George into it with your lies," Thane was shouting, "but you don't come over me with these same ! If I go out to fight it 'ull be——"

Margery brushed against him, then with a quick movement of her hand across her eyes was apologizing pleasantly. The smoke had blinded her ; she really thought it wonderful how men could sit and talk and enjoy themselves in so stifling an atmosphere ; she had felt sure Bouwer would prefer taking his lunch in the private dining-room ; it was laid there, quite ready ; would he come and have it ? "

Woodward watched her in amazement ; watched, too, the transformation on the face of the angry Bouwer.

Flattered by her looks, her words, her attention, the Boer—who, despite a rough exterior and unrefined habits, inherited in part the blood of the most chivalrous of European nations—became on the instant oblivious to Thane's partly uttered threat of joining the invading forces, intent only on a ready acceptance of the advances of the haughty daughter of The Outspan. Margery could be cold—terribly cold—Bouwer had had humiliating experience of her lofty disdain of his clumsy wooing. Never before had that gracious, friendly charm of manner been

extended to him. Inwardly he perceived the reason, but self-satisfaction inflated his vanity and he resolved to ingratiate himself into her favour by refusing to continue the quarrel with her hot-headed brother. With a word of delighted acceptance and thanks, he turned and followed her from the bar.

The disappointed Boers, with snarls and jeers, commented upon the sergeant's evident weakness where the *meisjes* were concerned ; while Thane, realizing his rashness in losing his temper in such dangerous environments, hastily sought seclusion in his bedroom.

Through the open window overlooking the garden the face of Woodward presently appeared.

"Come along, old chap ; your sister has sent word by Babs that we shall find something to eat laid out on the back stoep."

"I hope to heaven she'll keep that skunk indoors, then," Thane grumbled as he let himself into the garden through the window.

Bouwer, sunning himself in the light of Margery's new graciousness, was very contentedly making a substantial meal off goat-flesh, with boiled maize and pumpkin served up as vegetables, which was the best fare the post-house could now supply.

"It's not often we get such luxuries in camp, I can assure you, Miss Margery," he said insinuatingly, allowing his bold glances to travel freely over the pale face with the sombre, burning eyes, which no effort on her part could lighten for more than a fleeting second at a time. He used her Christian name with accentuated relish, realizing how this unheard-of liberty, impossible under ordinary circumstances, would sting to the depths of her proud soul.

But, to Margery, the man before her was but a Thing come direct from the camp which harboured her brother. Gently, but persistently, she waived aside Bouwer's clumsy attempts at gallantry, and led the conversation back to the original point.

"You left him well ?"

"Oh, quite fit," with an attempt at the free and easy colloquialisms of his English acquaintances "down Pietersberg way." "He sent a bundle of most tender messages—love, and so forth," he waved his hand, holding the dinner-knife, in her direction with a confidential leer. "I'd like to parcel them out on my own; you twig, Miss Margery?" he burst into a loud, hearty guffaw—"and why not—why not? seeing as you know I am a bachelor man looking out for a wife."

With difficulty Margery rounded her lips into the semblance of a smile, which encouraged the Dutchman into a further confidential outburst.

"You see, it's this way, Miss Margery," he went on, falling into a tone of the friendliest familiarity. "I should have been a wedded man long ere this—owning as I do a splendid property, with some hundreds of head of cattle, and thousands of sheep and goats, and a strongly-built, well-furnished house all standing waiting ready for a mistress; but, somehow I have been unlucky, *verdoemd* unlucky! Well, there was my first love—a boy's love you may reckon it, and maybe it was that. Still, I fancied her—Aletta—for my wife; but George, as we all know, snatched her from me; so she was lost to me. Then Tante Jacoba said: 'Do not take it to heart, *neef* Petrus; try again with Johanna. She is a fine maiden; better-looking, sweeter-natured, softer, more loving than her sister.' So I turned to Jo—but there again I am forestalled."

Babs, who had run into the room, stood leaning both elbows on the table with eyes intently watching the speaker. Now she asked in her direct, challenging fashion: "What does 'forestalled' mean?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Bouwer; "you'll know all about it, little *meisje*, in a few years' time. My word! but I feel half inclined to wait for you. Would you have me?" he asked, jocularly.

"I don't want you, thank you," replied Babs disdainfully, not understanding the question in its entirety but

disapproving of having anything whatever in connection with the Boer. She stamped impatiently as she spoke :

" I came in to ask when you people are going to let George come back from your horrid old camp," she said, hotly.

" Those are secrets I must not give away," Bouwer replied, smiling in an irritating fashion. " See then, Babs, you'll be a handsome young *meisje* before very long and have heaps of sweethearts ready to fight each other for you, if only you keep on copying your sister in looks." Babs stared at him, then turned her gleaming eyes searchingly on Margery. " Yes, my word ! but you two are tremendously alike." His eyes, as insolently familiar as his tones, travelling slowly from the child to the woman, then back from the woman to the child, caused Margery's usually expressionless eyes to blaze and burn with sudden fire beneath their lowered lids.

" Sisters very frequently are alike, as you may have noticed before, Mr. Bouwer," she said in tones so dry and cold as to attract even Babs' inattentive ear. Then, turning to the child and placing a covered dish in her hands : " For Thane," she directed abruptly, and Babs thus dismissed reluctantly left the room.

" Well," said the sergeant, noisily pushing back his chair, " I must be off, sorry as I am to leave such pleasant company ; but duty, you know, Miss Margery, comes before all else when one is serving *onze land* ; especially in these dark days when all her sons must arm and bestir themselves to defend her freedom. But, of course, the war will pass—the war will pass—the land will come back to us ; and then, Miss Margery—then, I trust, we shall be allowed more pleasant hours of talk together."

His moist, limp hand clung to hers while he stared persistently into her face. She retained her grasp in his, at the same time holding her head high ; a flicker of wrath, or pain, or amusement on her curling lips as she lightly avoided his gaze. " Out of coyness," his vanity suggested, and he considered his proper attitude to be one of immense *empressement*.

"But you won't forget my messages to George," Margery counselled him in friendly tones.

"How could I?" he began, but she cut him short.

"George *must* be back before long, otherwise all his next season's crops will be a complete failure. You're such a good farmer you will understand, I am sure. And you have influence—you are such a big man nowadays, Mr. Bouwer. I quite look to you to help George to get back as soon as he has fixed up the transport at the camp; to see that van der Merwe does not hold him there too long."

"Anything I can do in the matter, be sure I shall do—for your sake," returned the delighted Bouwer. "But you flatter me, indeed you do. Influence! Well, perhaps I have a little. But depend upon it, Miss Margery, what I can do I shall—for your sake."

"I shall not forget it if you do," Margery replied pointedly, still graciously polite.

Then he was gone, and for the rest of the short afternoon, the latest arrivals of recruits to the Boer camp having saddled up and ridden from the post-house in the direction of Louw's Krantz, a restful quiet fell upon The Outspan.

"I wonder when they will let *broertjie* come back," said Babs for the twentieth time, as she sat with outstretched legs on the kaross spread alongside the shabbily-cushioned but deep and comfortable wicker couch on which Margery rested after the long hours of work. The rays of the declining sun fell in patches through the brown, sere leaves of the creepers twining up the trellis-work of the back verandah where the family were assembled to while away the last moments of a Sabbath which had proved to this wayside household the very reverse of a Day of Rest. "When do you think, father?" she persisted, raising her, bright eyes from the book of Bible pictures that rested on her knees to look into the old man's gloomy face.

"Can't tell, my child—can't tell," he returned abstractedly, as he pulled his short, grey, pointed beard through and through his restless fingers. His thoughts were with his younger son, who must now leave the old homestead; the war was taking both his boys from him.

"Didn't Bouwer give you news of him?" asked Woodward, to whom Babs made her next appeal.

"That beast!" cried the child angrily, while a sound between a growl and an oath came from Thane.

"I must go and help Sinclair," he said presently, slowly lifting himself up from his low seat on the steps leading from the stoep into the garden, and knocking the ash out of his pipe; "we must be getting our things together."

"When do you leave?" asked Woodward; and "About midnight," Thane answered laconically as, followed by his father, he went indoors.

"The rush is really over, I believe," said Margery, after listening for further sound of hoof or wheel; "we shall, I hope, be left in peace for the rest of the evening."

"I was thankful when Bouwer and his men went off," remarked Woodward. "I feared at one time they had quite made up their minds to shoot the lot of us, and burn down the place."

"They won't do that so long as they consider there's a chance left of driving back the Irregulars, and holding the district."

"And if they can't drive them back—what then?"

"When they recognize defeat, they'll burn out every farmstead, beginning with The Outspan."

"—if they can," suggested Woodward.

"Well, I suppose some of us will be on the look out."

Woodward nodded.

"The Irregulars are pushing their way through—bound direct for The Outspan, you may be sure."

"Then let us hope the old post-house will be left to us."

"If it gets burnt by those horrid Boers, shall we have

to go and live at the Top Farm, Margery ? ” asked Babs, raising her eyes to the far-off summit of the mountain.

“ I expect so, Babs. ”

“ But where would George live ? Oh ! with us, I suppose ; it would be nice for some things ; I could go off to the lands with him every morning. ” Then her brow darkened. “ I’d like to burn down Petrus Bouwer’s house, ” she exclaimed vindictively ; “ the sneak ! ”

“ But surely not, Babs ! What harm has he done ? ” asked Woodward, in pretended surprise.

“ He is a sneak, ” she repeated firmly. “ He pretends to like George, and calls himself his oldest friend ; yet I know he would keep him there at the camp for ever, if he could. ”

“ Why ? ” Woodward asked again.

“ ‘ Cause George married Aletta, and *he* wanted to marry her, you see, ” Babs explained triumphantly.

“ You precocious child, ” laughed the captain.

“ And he said something funny about Jo being—being—what was that word, Margery ?—fore—fore—something. ”

“ —forestalled, ” said Margery, in what Babs called her “ far away ” voice, as she lay resting her eyes upon World’s View.

“ Such a funny word ! ” continued the child, appealing to Woodward ; “ and he said it so funnily, too ; just the same way he spoke when he looked from you to me, Margery, and then back again from me to you and said, ‘ really—tremendously alike. ’ Why did you get so angry, Margey ? Don’t you like people to say I am like you, darling ? ” She lifted her plump cheek to rub it caressingly against the pale face. “ Don’t you like them to think so ? ” she murmured.

“ Of course I do, Babsie dear . . . But what made you think I was angry ? ”

“ Your voice—it sounded so hard, and cold, and snappy-like ; I could tell in a minute. ”

Woodward laughed. “ One has to be careful when you are about, Babs. ”

"Yes, I am pretty sharp," returned Babs, complacently. "Tante Jacoba says it's *wonnerlyk* and a sign that I'll die young, or else that I am going to have three husbands. But she's only an ignorant old Boer woman and does not know anything—except, of course, about the *opzit*, and secrets like that which she has learned from Oom Jan. Still, she can make ripping *kornfyt*—so sugary and crisp, it melts in your mouth. Oh, I wish you could taste it! But this horrid war! Margery, when *will* we be able to get plenty of sugar through, so that you can make *kornfyt* again?"

"I don't know, Babs—soon, I hope," Margery answered absently, her eyes still fixed on the gaunt mountain-side, where the evening shadows came and went, causing an ever-moving panorama of light and shade to play upon the background of the rugged height over whose lofty, boulder-strewn top her brother had disappeared. So obsessed was she by the thought of his terrible position of his probable detention, of the unlikelihood of his possibility of return until the war had reached its final conclusion, that she lost the note of silence that followed upon Babs' prattle and failed to notice the child had run indoors.

With a start she roused herself to meet Woodward thoughtfully regarding her as he stood opposite the couch, his back against a verandah post, his hands dug into the pockets of his khaki coat.

"I did not notice Babs had slipped away."

"Do you know that as you looked up at the mountain you awed me?" he said, speaking suddenly as though forced to share with her some all-compelling thought rankling in his mind.

She turned her eyes upon him, and for an instant he saw—or thought he saw—in their greyish-green depths a hint of sudden consternation, of vivid emotion, that told a tale of a sudden, disquieting pulsation—a heart-beat as suddenly suppressed as felt.

"Forgive me for my rude stare; but—you——" he clutched at words of explanation. "Never have I seen

so detached a look on the face of man or woman ! . It frightened me . . . Where were your thoughts ? . . . Where had your spirit flown ? ”

“ Need you ask ? ”

As she spoke, she lifted herself from the couch, and stood erect immediately before him, facing him across the narrow width of the verandah. Her arms were lifted high above her head as she secured the loosened hairpins that held in position the coils of hair twisted into a big, loose knot above the thickness of her straight and strongly-marked black brows and square, white forehead. Standing thus, she faced him as though in a silent defiance. Inwardly she experienced again a sudden return of that unwelcomed, half-dormant, scarcely-perceptible, yet unmistakable note of sound, or feeling, or emotion—of possibly all these combined—that once before had struck so sharply upon the senses underlying her swathed and trammelled womanhood—puzzling, irritating and alarming her.

“ No, I don’t need to ask.” He had come a step nearer, and she noted the unusual pallor on the bronzed face, detected the forceful note in the deep, arresting voice. “ I envy the man who has it in him to call forth such a wealth of thought and devotion and love ; that man has no need of anyone’s pity . . . living, he is never forgotten——”

“ And yet——” said Margery, soothed by the thought his words suggested, “ yet, George deserves sympathy.” She turned and moved slowly up and down the long, narrow stoep, still speaking, her eyes bent, her voice low. “ His is just one of those countless, inexplicable, cruel cases which serve to bring home to us how fiendish and inhumanly-cruel life at bottom really is . . . Here was a man to whom the path of duty was sacred . . . yet such a steep, thorny path opened out to him . . . such a divided duty !—his friends on the one hand—his country on the other . . . He chose country, and duty—his high sense of honour could not allow him to do otherwise

. . . Yet it was hard—cruelly hard—for him to go against those he loves so dearly—against his home—his people . . . We are *everything* to him ! Think, too ”—she looked up in his face with eyes no longer veiled and dull—“ think how my brother will be misunderstood by all the world !—even father and Thane can’t comprehend or fathom his motives. I—I only——” she broke off suddenly ; then added slowly : “ I understand.”

“ It is only when we attain the heights of love that we understand,” he said, meaningly. Again his tone and words and looks soothed her restless pain. She divined the intense sympathy that pervaded them. So strongly did this sense of his sympathy act upon her burdened spirit, that it had the power to draw her into an acquiescence of that friendship for which he had pleaded, and which he now assured himself he had secured.

XV

BABS, who had wandered down the passage into the smoke-room, watched with absorbed attention Thane's every movement, as he stood by the window engaged in the task of overhauling and polishing up his rifle.

"May I fill your cartridge-belt and bandolier, Thane?" she presently inquired.

He nodded in assent.

"Yes, you may as well, Babs," he replied, good-naturedly.

She climbed on the chair before the deal table set against a corner of the room, where on its linoleum-covered surface there rolled a bunch of cartridges. Belt in hand, she carefully filled each receptacle in turn, and then applied herself to the duty of filling the bandolier.

"I wish George was here, that I might fill his too," she said, plaintively.

The tears rose, filling her jewel-bright eyes to overflowing, and she wiped them away furtively and patiently with the hem of her brown holland overall. Thane, from under lowering brows, watched the simple, childish action with a fierce, deep pang of pain. A sense of fresh fury struck across the anger ever smouldering within his implacable, stubborn heart—of fresh hatred against the Boers—the war—his brother—his own unforgiving temper . . .

"You mustn't get low, Babs; keep up your pluck, little woman, or we'll be having the old man and Margery down in the dumps," he said, kindly.

She struggled for a moment with her sorrow.

"There's Woodward too, and old Lisbeth," went on Thane, encouragingly, "all looking to you; you're the only one that can bring a smile to their long faces."

"I try to talk so as to make them laugh just the same, Thane," the child said, pathetically; "but sometimes I can't even be naughty, *broertje*; there's such an awful choking sort of pain across here." She raised her small, plump hand to her chest realistically.

Thane nodded comprehendingly.

"George will come back all right, little one." He forced himself to utter his brother's name in his wish to hearten the child. "He'll be back safe enough one of these days, and then he'll praise you for your pluck."

She brightened wonderfully.

"Oh, do you really think he will, *broertje*?"

The next moment she uttered a cry of alarm.

"Look, Thane! look there!" she pointed through the open door. "Boers—Boers—hundreds of them—riding up the road!"

Thane stepped quickly to the door and peered through the dim light at a mounted troop of khaki-clad men riding along the high-road in the direction of the post-house.

As their leader entered the yard, the barman came running up from the stables to entreat of Thane to hurry into hiding; while Margery and Woodward, summoned by the frightened Babs, entered quickly from the back premises.

"What can they be coming here for?" asked Margery, pressing her face over her brother's shoulder in order to obtain a better view of the party. "Could George be with them?" "Are they van der Merwe's lot?" everybody was asking themselves anxiously.

"But they come from the other direction," insisted Thane.

"Thane, better go down through the garden and keep

along the river, out of sight, till they leave," Margery counselled, anxiously. "Do persuade him, Captain Woodward."

But: "Wait a minute," replied Thane obstinately, in reply to all entreaties and suggestions. "Wait a minute, Sinclair, man—don't you get chicken-hearted . . . it's quite safe . . . it's not us they are after."

"Oh, Thane, haven't they come to carry you off to fight?" asked Babs, trembling between fear and excitement.

"Not they, Babsie—don't you get frightening yourself; it's only food and drink they'll be wanting." His tones changed suddenly: "I say!—*they're not Boers!*"

"Not Boers!" and "Not Boers!" echoed everyone. Then: "I'm off to make sure of that, my boy," came from old Brandon, as he started off on a bee-line course for the stables.

The four men rushed from the room. Down the steps leading from the verandah, across the front yard that stretched to the stables, they hurried. "Not Boers! Are you *shure*, Mister Thane?" the barman cautiously inquired.

"Look for yourself at that leader—there. Ever see a Boer so wiry and alert, or one who sits a horse like that chap?"

"I believe they are a squad of the Bushmen! Yes, I recognize some of my old chums," exclaimed Woodward, in a tone of immense relief; and "Hurrah! Heaven be praised!" shouted Sinclair, feeling considerably safer than he had done for the past twenty-four hours.

"Hark! That's Sinclair, shouting! . . . it's all right, then," cried Babs, who on the stoep had not been able in her excitement to refrain from jumping up and down, torn between expectancy and hope. Loosening her hand from Margery's clasp, she bounded down the steps, and ran to meet the advancing party, now conversing pleasantly together, while the latter followed more slowly.

"Oh, Thane! Thane! then you won't have to go?"

Babs called aloud joyfully, throwing her small person upon him and clasping her arms about his body.

The Australian leader—a sparely-built man, of iron nerves and reckless temperament—stopped in his talk to glance with keen, quick, ready sympathy at the spectacle of the child's wildly-intense delight, and raised his cap deferentially in response to Margery's words of welcome.

Then, still bareheaded, he mounted the steps of the verandah, and turning to face his audience proclaimed in sharp, clear accents The Outspan as having changed hands—as having passed from Boer to Briton.

■

BOOK THREE

■

I

SEVERAL months had elapsed since the morning on which George Brandon had climbed World's View to join the camp at Louw's Krantz, and The Outspan had not seen his familiar face and form since that day.

Summer now lay upon the land, and the veldt-world, in all its radiant beauty, glowed exultantly—bursting into bud and blossom and hurrying relentlessly towards fruit-bearing and maturity—beneath the burning kisses of its lover and lord, as some fair radiant bride might glow and exult—budding and blossoming unconsciously yet surely by the force of Nature's unseen but inexorable contrivance towards the prime object of her creation—beneath the passionate ardour and intensity of her lover and mate.

Van der Merwe and the other leaders of the commando, gathering daily in numbers and strength at the Boer camp, had warmly welcomed the young English Transvaaler into their ranks, and the duties apportioned him were, as the *predikant* had promised, strictly those appertaining to the department of the commissariat, the transport, and remount. At these he worked unflaggingly throughout the following days, anxious to get all in order for the sortie upon the border camps of the Irregulars on which van der Merwe had set his mind. This task completed, and the commando started on the undertaking, his work would be over, and his return to The Outspan unopposed.

But the Sunday well over, at midnight there arose a great stir throughout the camp. A scout had ridden in with the unwelcome and alarming intelligence that the enemy, from an unexpected quarter, had crossed the trackless veldt and were close upon them. No later than sunset they had taken possession of the post-house, and now rested there, strongly entrenched, waiting only the bringing up of reinforcements before making a raid upon the camp at Louw's Krantz.

A council of war had been hastily convened, which led to a general stampede of the undisciplined Boers—whose weakness throughout the conflict lay in their refusal to recognize, or submit to, the commands of their superior officers—to a stronghold further north. George Brandon found himself swept along with the rest. Once having joined their ranks and become cognizant of their new camping-ground, he recognized the futility of requesting for leave to return, or endeavouring to make his escape. Many among the Boers looked upon him with suspicion, ready to shoot him should he attempt return to his old home at the present critical juncture of affairs; while the leaders also, were too wary to allow any man of the commando to fall by mischance into the enemy's hand.

"But, of course, we all know that you would not give away our plans, nor let them guess the locality of our new camp," van der Merwe assured him sympathetically. "Still, it would be awkward for you to go back just now. The Bushmen would certainly try their best to worm out useful information, and did you refuse to give this they might shoot you as a spy; they stick at nothing—so we hear."

To these repeated assurances George had to listen in silence, feeling there was a certain amount of truth in the *predikant's* words, and that in any case to return was, at the present moment, an impossibility. So as the days passed into weeks, and the weeks rolled into months, he no longer urged his request, but contented himself as best

he could with the knowledge that his old home would remain safe under military protection. Entrenched as it was by the invading forces, the Boers would never attempt to regain possession of The Outspan.

During these months of absence, of wanderings over the wide, trackless veldt, he had heard from time to time through the agency of van der Merwe's host of scouts and spies news of Aletta and of the dwellers at The Outspan, and knew that with these loved ones all had gone well. His farm interests, too, had flourished; the crops were well advanced and promising, so van der Merwe assured him, adding that the Lord had blessed and prospered him so that his flocks and herds had not suffered from foot-rot or rinderpest; but that, on the contrary, they had multiplied and increased, according to the promises of the Almighty to the man who is faithful in the service of his God and his country.

In this manner the months had slipped by while a guerilla warfare, bloodless for the most part, had been waged at intervals between the retreating Boers and the indefatigable Irregulars. There were rumours in the air of a conference down south to arrange terms of peace. The Boers, heartened by these rumours, held on with grim tenacity. Sick of war and longing for peace, they yet retained much of their old tactical vigour. "When Peace comes, my son, we will be found still holding our rifles in our hands," the tough old *predikant* was wont to assure George.

Like many another Transvaaler, the young man prayed that it might come soon to ease the land of the burden beneath which it groaned. He had done his work, had shared the rough lot of his comrades-in-arms, had spent himself freely in the service of his country and, since he had shed the blood of no man, he remained content, awaiting only the proclamation of peace.

Continually the thought of Thane weighed heavily on his heart. Aletta had sent word of his brother's fierce, implacable anger; of his unappeased outpouring of fury

against the Boers; against herself, against her sister. He had hardened his heart against Jo and, now that he had wrought his devil's work upon her, absolutely refused to look upon her face or send the slightest message in response to her frantic appeals. Even Margery, touched by the hard trouble that had fallen upon her, had appealed to her brother, but always unsuccessfully. The Outspan saw him but seldom; he was in every scrap; fighting, so report said, like a very devil incarnate alongside the foremost, fiercest and most daring spirits among the army of the daring and fiery-spirited Irregulars.

This news it was that had weighed most persistently upon George Brandon's heart and brain and spirit. Supposing it were true—if Thane had indeed quitted the old home and thrown in his lot with the most persistent of the Irregular forces—the Bushmen—who were daily and nightly pressing in deadly earnest upon the retreating Boers—would the future hold the hour in which he and his brother might possibly stand face to face in deadly conflict? The bare thought of so hideous a situation, so dreadful a catastrophe, was too unbearable to be entertained or dwelt upon; nevertheless, it would start up in his quiet moments facing him insistently in all its grim, naked, horrible reality.

One warm, languorous evening he lay under the wagons drawn up, as was the usual custom when in camp, to form a rough *laager* in case of unexpected attack. As he smoked, his mind dwelt with the old insistence, the old longing, upon his brother. How would it be between them when he returned? Would Thane ever forgive his part in the war? Could even the long years of the future stretching before them ever wipe away the knowledge that they had served in hostile camps? Would their children tell the tale to one another, so breeding and fostering the ill-will and the hate, the bitterness and the unforgiveness, between Thane's descendants and his? His thoughts wandered further. Would he leave behind him a child to bear his name, to inherit his shame—since


in many quarters shame would certainly attach to his action in joining the army of the Republic? The children Aletta had borne him had died in infancy, but there had been a prospect of another little one—so Tante Jacoba had said. Then his thoughts returning to his brother, he recalled Jo and her unreasoning, headstrong passion for him. Well would it have been for the Boer girl had this cruel civil strife been avoided, so casting no stumbling-block across the path of her ill-starred passion. With her forceful love for Thane consummated by their union as man and wife, her strong affection would have drawn him closely to herself; would have softened and influenced his harder nature; would have helped him against his own hot temper, his often ungovernable moods. They would have been an ideally happy couple . . . But it was not to be . . . Aletta's words returned to him. "Poor Jo! . . . another woman's life ruined by this cruel war . . . another woman to suffer with the sufferings of the motherland."

The Boers had gradually collected around the wagons. They sat on the ground, their pipes only half-hidden in the palms of their hairy, roughened hands as in harsh tones they slowly and gruffly hummed their tuneless hymns. George recollected it was Sunday. He lay upon his outspread mackintosh, looking out over the great, dark void of the night stretching before him in all its solemn immensity while he dreamed and listened, now to that gruff, uninspiring, unmelodious chanting, then to the eager, fervent, burning words of van der Merwe as the undaunted, quick-witted *predikant* expounded the Word to his hearers, choosing that Word strictly in accordance as they were able to hear it; chiefly, it seemed, in taking the words of his text as applicable in their entirety solely to themselves as a people God-fearing and God-guided to whom would certainly be granted in the long run a sure and decisive victory over their enemies—so said the Book; and the man among them who could doubt the inference and the assurance to be drawn from

this particular text of the Book was less than an atheist and an infidel ! . . .

But now he was uttering an impassioned extempore prayer : " Our fathers served Thee, and Thou did'st fight for them and did'st overthrow their enemies . . . and Thou gavest them this fair land—our beloved country (*Onze land ! onze land !* interpolated the Boers, ardently—fervently) . . . Yea, Lord, and Thou wilt never suffer it to pass from us and from our children ; nor allow it to fall under the dominion of strangers (*Nooit ! Nooit !* groaned the Boers) . . . Thou wilt give us the victory if we keep together and fight like men . . . (*Ja ! Ja !* shrilled the chorus of voices) . . . "

Long after the service was concluded and quiet had fallen upon the sleeping camp, George still lay on his side gazing out upon the silver-grey radiance that fell across the darkness of the night. Stretched in slumber, the veldt-world rested hushed and motionless around him. Bright and early the Boers were to be up and away, traversing its immensity ; seeking to ambush their enemies, to retard their advance, and so to harass and hamper them that when peace was proclaimed these dauntless sons of the Transvaal back-veldt would still be found, as van der Merwe had said, " a free people and unconquered."



II

TANTE JACOBA sat tightly wedged within the uncompromising embrace of the capacious wooden seat of primitive, homely make; part arm-chair, part sofa, designed originally with diabolical ingenuity to hold two persons—*opzitte* evidently—but now claimed by the gross and overblown Boer *wrouw* for her individual requirements, and held by the rest of the members of the family as sacred to her person.

The arm-chair, occupying its usual summer position, stood in the corner nearest the window overlooking the stoep and the cart-track that led to the homestead of du Bruyn's Rust. In the winter it invariably snuggled as closely as possible to the open fire-place, and a box-footstool, heated by hot bricks placed within its interior, stood before it as a rest for the Tante's enormous lower limbs.

This footstool, minus the heating apparatus, now groaned beneath its usual heavy burden as Tante Jacoba, leaning well forward, gazed peeringly up and down the blank road lying silent and solitary beneath the sweltering rays of the afternoon sunlight. Then, with an ominous shake of her head and a slightly discontented frown on her heavy, expressionless brow, she turned to eye with direct, searching gaze the face of her younger daughter. Johanna, undisturbed by the look, continued to snip and sew diligently at sundry small, soft garments heaped together in a basket that stood on the table before her.

"*Die slechte! Die verdoemd schelm!*" cried Tante Jacoba, in a shrill, heated voice, taking up the thread of

her late tirade of abuse against men in general and Thane Brandon in particular, "to cause us to be shut up here as prisoners; unable even to step a foot from off the farm; yet never so much as to come himself near you—his *bruid*! Dear Lord, never yet have I known or heard of such an *opzit*!"

"Thane can't help what the Irregulars do, Ma," replied Johanna calmly, seeing her mother evidently expected some reply from her. "It's the Australian *commandant*—the officer-in-charge—who has given orders that the Boer families are not to be allowed off their farms."

"Their men are on all sides of us," grumbled her mother. "Don't I know it? Not even a mouse—let alone your poor father living out there among the wild creatures—can so much as creep through on to the farm, not even of a night."

"Blame the Australians, not Thane," remarked Johanna.

Her words kindled afresh the flame of a further grievance.

"There you go, Johanna!" snapped the old woman crossly, "sticking up for that fine sweetheart of yours. Beware, my girl, of Thane Brandon in his present temper of mind! He's not the chap he was—not since George went off. *Toch! Toch!* I should like to put a bullet through that old van der Merwe! If only he were not a preacher of the Lord's Word! if only he were as other men, wouldn't I scratch out his eyes for him! *Toch! Toch!*"

Johanna's lip curled.

"Why do you tell me to beware of Thane?" she asked, dryly. "Have you not just been complaining that he never comes here? And I am a prisoner! . . . Can I, then, see him to take harm of him?"

"You have already seen too much of the godless *schepsel*," Tante Jacoba snorted, significantly. "To worm news out of you he'd betray you as vilely as ever Judas Iscariot betrayed our blessed Lord."

Johanna's black eyes flashed as she answered in a tone of sharp remonstrance:

“Ma, I’ll not have such things said of Thane.”

“Go your own way; go your own way!” returned her mother, coarsely. “You’ll do as you please; you are so over-wise—like all the maidens of the present day who think they know more than the mothers who bore them. Yet, mark my words, girl, it will be to the mothers they’ll come running when they lose their slimness. *Toch*, then! to think what’s falling upon our land and upon our people! But, there! it’s the will of the dear Lord, and we must just sit still under the punishment He is sending upon our land and upon our people. But we are being beaten with many stripes! *Toch! Toch!*”

Tante Jacoba fetched up an immense sigh that disturbed the few million of flies crawling on the window-panes and blackening the walls and the white-washed ceiling of the *zit-kamer*, as she resignedly folded together a pair of enormously-fat, red-brown hands.

“It won’t be to you, Ma, that I’ll run,” said Johanna, with a flicker of a smile in the dimpled corners of her red lips. “If ever that sort of help is needed for me it will be Aletta I’ll turn to.”

“*Heer!*” Tante Jacoba started in real surprise, while her beady blue eyes twinkled in astonishment upon her smiling daughter. “So that’s what you and Letty have been putting your heads together about?” Again she surveyed her daughter with an intent and searching but evidently unsatisfactory scrutiny; for she continued, questioningly: “What is at the bottom of it all? What are you two *duivels* planning? Come, tell your old mother, my girl.”

But Johanna shook her head, perversely:

“It’s Aletta’s plan, Ma; I can say nothing; you must get out of her what you can.”

“Soh——” murmured Tante Jacoba consideringly, “Soh—Letty’s very obstinate at times—very trying; she led that poor man of hers a fine dance of late, just because the good fellow was too much of a gentleman to take the *sjambok* to her. But I told him—just in order to send him

off heartened up and inclined to come back quick—that there was a prospect of another little one——”

“You told George *that*?” interrupted her daughter in astonishment.

“*Ja . . . Ja!* and why not? I thought so, honestly; I still think so,” she eyed her daughter interrogatively.

“Maybe,” Johanna replied, shortly. “But you need not tell Margery—not just yet,” she added.

“Soh—well, anyhow it’s a good arrangement; Letty must give George a son, for there’s the farm—it can surely never be the will of the Lord that the place should go to that godless Thane’s descendants,” Tante Jacoba observed with pious unction, yet keeping a shrewd eye to the main issue. “So let us pray, since a babe is to come, that it will be a man child.”

“For that I care not,” Johanna asserted, indifferently.

“Well, so long as a child born to George and Letty inherits the farm—all the same, my girl, it will be a scandal for you. Believe your old mother, who knows the men: child, or no child, Thane Brandon will never take you as wife before the *kerk*—never put the ring on your finger; your chance with that hot-tempered *schepsel* is past and over. This business of the war—and then his brother’s going to join our burghers . . . *Ach!* that did the mischief!”

“And who have I to thank for that?” exclaimed Johanna, with a flash of anger shooting across her wild, dark eyes. “Wasn’t it Aletta who egged her own man into going, although, as I told her, Thane had sworn never to marry me if once George joined the commando? Yet she had no thought for me, no heart for my trouble, or for the trouble down at The Outspan—but drove him on, embittering all his people against us. Still, for all that, the day is yet to dawn on which Thane will certainly make me his wife.”

“Then why does he not come and see you, as an *oprecht* young man would do?” persisted her mother, testily; and to this query Johanna had but one reply: “The Australian *commandant*, Ma; he won’t allow it.”

"*Toch! Ioch!* I don't know what the young men and maidens are coming to, nowadays," complained the old *vrouw*; and then, impelled by a sudden dryness to remember the hour, she called in stentorian tones to the kaffir-girl to bring in the coffee.

Through the open doorway Johanna caught a glimpse of the approach of a big, white umbrella, green-lined and carried by a white-robed figure, moving with a steady swing along the hard, white track. Instantly she covered up her work, then sped down the pathway to meet her friend.

"Did Thane send you?" were her first words.

"No," Margery replied, lowering the big umbrella.

"Not even a message?" implored Johanna, humbly.

Margery shook her head. "No—no message."

"When will he grow human again? When will he begin to think of me—of my need?" Johanna burst forth with vehemence.

"George has been gone six months to-day, Jo," Margery said, ignoring the girl's impassioned outcry.

"You mean—not till George comes back—that, until then, you won't raise your voice to help me with Thane? *Heer!* Margery Brandon, are you human?—are you a woman?—consider my position. Am I to remain in suspense for two—three—six months longer?"

"That means George isn't to be allowed to come back for another six months," Margery said quickly, a strain of fierceness creeping into her tones.

Each girl was fighting for the man dearest to her heart, the man each in her own way fiercely desired to have or to serve. Johanna, Margery recognized, was cognizant of much that was taking place—of Aletta's plans for George, of her intrigues carried on with van der Merwe through the agency of Bouwer; while, on the other hand, Johanna felt convinced that Margery was the only one who could successfully influence Thane on her behalf.

"*Heer!* how can I know when George will be back?" she asked in softer tones; "don't blame me, Margery,

for what our people do. You are as unreasonable as Thane."

"You know," Margery persisted, inflexibly. "What Aletta does, you know and just how often she sees Bouwer."

Johanna started back.

"Bouwer——!" she repeated, feebly.

"I don't ask you to give away her secrets," pursued Margery, relentlessly. "But the thing I do ask and expect of you, Jo, is to keep her from seeing Bouwer; from sending messages to old van der Merwe to keep George—and to keep George—and to keep George! . . ." her stern, severe glance, her low, intense tones, bore abundant testimony to the wave of anger surging and swelling within the depths of her storm-tossed heart. "You stop it, Jo," she added sharply, "you see to it that she sees no one from the commando, that she gets no chance to carry on her devilish work of preventing her husband from returning to his home; you do this for me, Jo, then I'll see that Thane marries you—when George is back. But not till George is safely back."

Johanna shrilled angrily:

"But you are hard as a stone? Of course I shall do my best to stop Aletta, if, as you say, she sends messages to van der Merwe to keep George. Yet, indeed, this cannot bring George back; it is the war—this cursed war which seems as though it would never end—that keeps him from us, from his home, from the wife who loves him, even though you credit her as false to him. No, Margery, your heart is set against helping me with Thane; that I see plainly, and so I shall have to try to help myself. I will make a plan to win him back—you shall see. Now let us go indoors for Ma is calling to you to come and talk with her."

"My faith, Margery," grunted Tante Jacoba, who was busy drinking coffee sweetened with honey, which invariably tried her placid temper. "Can't those people down south arrange matters? Are they going to sit talking and talking till we backveldt Boers are stamped out? Is England going to grind our people into dust, and then

scatter us over the veldt like the chaff which the wind scattereth over the face of the land!" she demanded rhetorically.

"England is just as sick of the war as we are," Margery replied, the frown of pain which mention of the war invariably brought to her brow darkening her face. "But England can't very well give in till the Boer Generals agree to her terms," she added; then, with a faint sigh, fell to sipping the coffee Jo had brought to her.

"And why do they not hurry themselves and settle matters," argued the old *wouw* angrily. "It is all very well for them, the *schelms*, to go riding around the country, talking and drinking, and smoking and idling away their days; having a regular jolly spree apart from their wives and families," she shook her head knowingly. "*Toch!* but I know, and I can tell you girls it's we poor women who've got to sit at home and *sukkel* for men's pleasure. No sugar!—and there's my old man who ought to be sleeping in his bed every night alongside of his lawful wedded wife, as the Book tells us man and wife should do, compelled to creep into caves and dens of the earth and to lodge among the wild beasts of the veldt! Whoever before heard of such a thing for a decent Christian man?"

"You would not like our people to give in too quickly, Ma?" urged her daughter.

"They've fought like men and now let them give in like men," returned Tante Jacoba with decision. "They can depend on the *Engelsch* acting in the same simple, foolish way as is ever their custom once they come to terms with the enemy who has cost them dearly in men and gold. Never mind that; the Government of Great Britain will all the same be giving us back our country once our Generals agree to their terms."

"And paying the Boers for their losses very probably," Margery added, scornfully, "paying them out of the British ratepayers' pockets."

"*Ach!* yes, so they will—so they will," laughed the Boer woman, putting her hands to her enormous hips and

rolling from side to side in a long, shrill cackle of extreme merriment. She wiped her streaming eyes and gasped : " Yes, truly, my child, it will be as you say, so foolish are the *rooineks*, but yet so stiff-necked—dear Lord, so stiff-necked and high-minded ! Why, where would they be in this war if they had not the *Kolonies* men to help them ? But talking of those devils, what about the Australian chap Bouwer copped and brought as prisoner to The Outspan ? He's sweet on you, Margery, isn't it so ? Do you *opzit* yet ? "

Margery laughed disdainfully.

" *Opzit* ! ! Gracious, Tante Jacoba, you can ask such a question ! With George at the front with the Boers, and Thane at the front with the Irregulars ! Good God ! and you ask me if I *opzit* ! Could I have the heart to listen to the courting even of an angel from heaven ? "

" No ; but to the courting of a man of flesh and blood like yourself, my girl, you might listen," retorted the Boer woman, shrewdly. " Love-making and mating between man and woman must go on, though the blood of the nations daily water and drench the soil of the land. And why ? 'Tis the decree of Nature—the mother of all creation—and against her eternal decrees, her deep contrivances for the increase of all things living in the world of man and bird and beast, and in the plant-life of the wide world around us, who may pit themselves and say ' the thing shall not be ' ? Doesn't the Book give us the command of the dear Lord Himself : ' Multiply and replenish the earth ' ? And so it all goes on, war or no war. Indeed, I expect Nature troubles herself more particularly about it when the nation's blood is being spilt and wasted so recklessly, since she is the mother and woman-like must worry over the *waste* of war. *Toch ! Toch !* to think of all our strong young men, the flower of our nation, shot down like meercats on the hill-sides, killed off like spring-buck in droves by this wicked, murderous war ! " She turned sharply on the two girls, " I am too old to bear children, but you, young women, it's

your business and duty to take likely men and listen to their courting so as to marry and bear sons in the place of those of our men of whom this war has robbed us."

Throughout the long tirade Margery stood looking down half-disdainfully, half-impatiently, as she listened to the homely sentiments of the old Boer.

Then she picked up her big umbrella and waved it in the direction of the mountain.

"See that hill, Tante?" she demanded, lightly. "Well, I must climb it to see Aletta. Nature? Oh, yes; we've heard all about mother-nature's deep tricks and cunning contrivances ever since we were grown girls, and so are well armed to circumvent her; aren't we, Jo? What's that? You're coming along with me a bit? All right . . . So long, Tante Jacoba," and she swung lightly from off the doorstep.

III

JOHANNA was compelled to part with Margery where the boundary fence marked the line that separated du Bruyn's Rust from The Outspan. Leaning upon the topmost wire strand, she gazed discontentedly after the retreating figure pushing its way through the rush-bordered pathway along the bank of the stream. She nodded in response as Margery, before rounding the bend which would hide her from sight, turned and waved her hand in farewell. Then her dark eyes wandered to the old wide-branched mimosa, bending over the rushing water as though to catch the substance of its ever-murmuring plaint, looking like hoary-headed age bowed by the ceaseless struggle of a long and burdened existence bending a drooping head and dimmed ear to catch the plaint of the ever-murmuring song of the rushing tide of a suffering humanity.

For some seconds of time Johanna looked fixedly and thoughtfully at the spot which harboured for her such bitter-sweet associations, then turned her gaze on the wheat and barley lands—a vast sheet of yellow, shimmering light—rustling and swaying, heavy-topped, grain-filled sheaves ready for the scythe of the advancing mower. The lands lay immediately across the stream, and from where she stood the Boer girl could catch occasional glimpses of the burly figure of her lover as he passed from point to point in the line of fields, superintending the reaping of the crops, which work was being carried on at top-speed by the farm-servants, reinforced by gangs of natives specially engaged

for the purpose of the in-gathering of the summer harvest. At this huge task, every available hand on the farm toiled energetically, sickle in hand, from earliest dawn to dusk, throughout the hours of the long, hot, sunshiny days. Johanna, as her black eyes followed Thane's movements and noted his quick, impatient gestures, bent her shapely, swelling bosom more heavily upon the supporting wire, while in her busily-active imagination scheme upon scheme, plan after plan, followed one upon the other in rapid succession, darting through her seething, storm-tossed brain only to be dashed aside as worthless or to be examined, weighed, polished, and then lodged safely in some secret, sacred receptacle of her inner consciousness for use when the time for action was ripe. As in life we may note a child with a newly-discovered treasure; see him looking closely and intently into it, turning it over, appraising its exact worth; then, with scornful action, tossing it aside or, with a smile of content, bestowing it safely within its most hidden and sacred repository—the bosom of its blouse for choice, or the prized trousers' pocket—so it was with the Boer girl and her endeavours towards the precious discovery of some plan whereby not only might her own love-story end satisfactorily but Margery's peace of mind, and Aletta and her husband's union and happiness, be secured. Some such plan, suggested by circumstances, had occurred to the sisters as answering all the above requirements. Aletta had boldly urged it upon her younger sister, but Johanna still halted in her decision. The plan involved treachery of a sort towards her lover and his people, and though, as Aletta pointed out to her, such treachery was necessary to bring about a final happiness to the Brandon family, and according to the infallible teaching of the Book we may do evil if good is to come of it, Johanna still hesitated. Had Margery been willing to intercede on her behalf with Thane, she would certainly have rejected Aletta's machinations. But only that afternoon Margery had given her plainly to understand that she need not look

to her for reconciliation with her lover until George had returned . . . and God alone knew when that would be, if ever! . . . and she wanted Thane! . . . she could not live longer without him! Curse the war! . . . and so—once more she drew from its safe lodgment on the shelf within her brain the precious plan.

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Margery, too, as she climbed higher and higher the mountain-side, turned and looked down upon that animated yet peaceful scene in the harvest-fields. The sunlight flashed and glinted on the smooth sides of the sharp sickles as the nude, chocolate-brown arms of the band of reapers were uplifted or dropped with a simultaneous, steady, rhythmical movement and the heavily-bearded heads of grain fell relentlessly, swept to mother-earth before the sharp, severing scythes of the mowers. From the height at which she now rested, Margery could still place the various figures. Thane, she could easily distinguish as he sat astride the old pony used as a general farm-back, and which now—with nothing more than an empty grain-bag thrown across its back by way of a saddle—patiently carried him from point to point, up and down the long, swelling acres of the ripe, nodding grain; past the army of mowers; past the graceful-limbed native women, with their crimson kerchiefs bound artistically above their black, inscrutable eyes and white, flashing teeth, as they stooped and gathered together and bound in bundles the fast-falling sheaves. Now she could see her brother's arm and hand shoot out in quick gesticulation; and though she could hear no sound, though all around her a wonderful stillness lay, Margery from her seat on the mountain-side—high above the rushing stream and the yellow harvest-fields, with their setting in the broad bosom of the illimitable plain—could yet well understand all that was passing in the mind of her brother, the orders he was shouting in sharp, peremptory fashion, even the imperious will that constrained him, thus to bend

his mind in undeviating attention upon the work in hand so as to shut out from his heart and brain images and thoughts that well-nigh drove him to frenzy and madness. All this Margery, in closest touch with that suffering, stubborn heart, could comprehend with fullest understanding and perfect sympathy.

She could see Babs—a dot among the grown-up folk—in her holland overall, very busily engaged in doing nothing, flitting hither and thither but more frequently pausing by the side of the wiry, upright, khaki-clad figure in flannel shirt-sleeves, working with the rest. At the thought of what this man had grown to be to Babs—who had created and set apart for him a special niche within the recesses of her exclusive but warmly-emotional heart—of the friend he had grown to be to all of them, a sense of comfort, of hope, of some hidden, precious, indefinable good stole across her veiled heart, seeming of so rare and blessed a nature that Margery Brandon—the bed-fellow of suffering, the close acquaintance of misery, and sorrow, and ill-luck—veiled the thought of it, refusing to look into its actuality lest by so doing it should fall and crumble into dust and nothingness, and she should awake to find herself wandering as of old “in a land of sand and thorns.”

She rose, resolutely turning her back upon the harvest-fields and their occupants as she again climbed the steep pathway leading to the Top Farm. Now, before her, she could see George's home—the home she had helped him to plan and furnish, the home they all had helped him to build, and to which he had taken Aletta as a bride. A shadow fell across her face as she bent her black, menacing brows upon the farmhouse. The small, compact red-bricked cottage with its corrugated iron roof, its low, slanting verandah, its green-painted shutters, and its front garden enclosed and bordered by a promising hedge of clipt kaffir-boem trees—George's special pride—all spoke in simple but eloquent language of the past. What days they had spent together there! What evenings they had passed in the firelit room of The Outspan—

planning, contriving, working at this new home to which the heir of the Brandons had gone forth from the old ! At the memory of those precious days when she had had her brother quite to herself—those days before marriage had taken him from his boyhood's home ; when of a night she would wake frightened or miserable, and then turn and drowse off again, content and comforted, since she could realize the bare fact that he was sleeping under the same roof as those to whom he was so dear—such a rush of emotion stirred within her that Margery, faint with misery, sat down at the side of the track, feeling for the moment quite incapable of facing the phlegmatic and unsympathetic Aletta.

"She always appears so unconcerned, so cocksure that George is well and happy and will soon be back ; it gets on my nerves," Margery told herself, irritably ; the burden laid upon her soul, the thought heaviest to be borne, was the intolerable suspicion that her brother was no longer a free agent, able to return to his home ; that he was virtually a prisoner, forced to remain with the commando, to share in their hardships, their wanderings, their perils, their dangers ; and that when the fight came—that fierce, bloody struggle which all foresaw was bound one day to occur between the retreating burghers and the advancing Irregulars—he would be forced to stand face to face in battle against the men of his own race and nationality—a position intolerable to him. Under this burden it was that Margery's heart and soul bowed heavily, and the cheerful face and placid temper of the phlegmatic Aletta caused her inwardly to writhe and suffer. Never altogether congenial to her, in the present crisis her sister-in-law was too ardent a partisan, too fierce a patriot, to prove a soothing companion. With Johanna she felt more in sympathy. Still, for George's sake she was resolved to maintain a constant, unbroken friendship with Aletta. In his interests she visited the Top Farm daily, discussed the crops and cattle, and thus acted as interpreter in the business of the farm-work between Aletta and Thane,

who, since his brother's departure, had steadily refused to set foot on the Top Farm.

"I believe Bouwer contrives to see her occasionally; he has been seen about this part; depend upon it, she knows more of what is going on than we do," Thane had said to her only the previous evening. "I don't trust her," and though Margery had ridiculed the idea, Johanna's start had given her pause for thought, and the hideous suspicion that Bouwer might be planning mischief to George on Aletta's account added to her burden of fear and uneasiness.

Often before, she had pleaded with her sister-in-law to leave the Top Farm homestead, and to take up her quarters at The Outspan, or with Tante Jacoba, until her husband's return. George himself had suggested the arrangement and had expressed the wish that, if possible, it should be carried out in case of delay in his return. Aletta, however, steadily refused to carry it out.

"I believe it now—I can quite believe it when I think of Jo's startled, guilty look—it is because she can get to meet Bouwer somewhere about here, on the hills, perhaps," thought Margery, desperately. "For George's sake I must get her away; if she won't come, I or Babs will have to live with her here . . . a desperate remedy! but I see no other way out of the tangle."

Rising, she walked up to the cottage. All was quiet without. She pushed open the gate in the hedge and passed noiselessly up the garden pathway into the front room.

Aletta stood before the inner door leading into the bedroom. Her face was flushed, her air unusually discomposed. Beneath the bodice of her light print gown her deep bosom rose and fell agitatedly, as her blue eyes roved searchingly over her sister-in-law's rigid form and dark, frowning brows. Margery had felt rather than seen a figure disappear quickly in the background; had felt rather than heard a sharp, breathless scuffle. So did the Boers disappear when the foe was upon them; in a

twinkling they would vanish from off the face of the veldt, while from unseen hands the volley of shot and hail of bullets would rain around, dealing death and destruction upon their defenceless opponents engaged in the vain attempt of battling against the unseen.

Margery's heart sank. She was fighting a shadow, a nightmare. Any moment the death-dealing blow might descend to wound, and torture, and madden. She felt her brother's fate to be sealed. Treachery was at work.

Aletta's voice roused her.

"Why, Margery, are you ill? You've walked too quickly up the hill! Haven't I told you not to bother to come up here every day? Here, sit down here."

Margery's eyes never left her face.

"Aletta! who—is—in—there?"

The other threw a quick, backward glance.

"You're mad! Who would be in there?"

"I saw—someone—a man."

Aletta's eyes hardened.

"You saw *me*—coming out of the room! Would you see for yourself? Look, then——"

She threw back the door. Margery, from where she stood, had a full view of the vacant bedroom, of the open window facing the mountain height.

Of what use to endeavour to prove her accusation, she asked herself, since the intruder had escaped? Of what use to persist in a statement that would but cause additional danger to her brother?

"Margery," Aletta said, passionately, "you would insult me with your suspicions; but never again set foot in my house if you harbour such vile thoughts of me."

"Of course I must have been mistaken," Margery replied in dull tones. "I certainly seemed to see a man behind you, who disappeared quickly into the bedroom as I came in. . . . I thought it might be——"

"Who?" demanded her sister-in-law, sharply.

"Your father; or, maybe, someone from the commando with a message from George."

Aletta moved forward heavily and sank down on a chair, resting her arms on the table, while Margery, who had remained standing, looked down on her.

"Then it *was* a message," she said in a low, deep tone. "Oh, Aletta, tell me if you have heard news of him."

"You are a little fool," Aletta replied, contemptuously. "George is well enough."

"Then you have heard?" repeated the other.

The Boer woman shrugged her broad shoulders.

"If I have should I tell you, in order that you may give me and my people away to your great friend, the Australian captain?"

"How could I, when it would mean getting news of George?" said Margery, simply. "He comes first with me."

"He *did*, I know; but when a woman gets a lover the brother comes second."

"Not with me," her sister-in-law returned dryly. "But, Aletta," she added, with a change of tone, "I'll tell you this much—you are already under suspicion of communicating with the enemy; so be careful. To save you from unpleasant consequences I shall come up here and stay with you for a time."

"But I don't want you, Margery," cried Aletta, in perturbed tones. "It will just be giving yourself trouble for nothing."

"But you must put up with my presence; or else come to us till George returns. The officer-in-charge was telling father and Thane it must be arranged either way."

"Oh! so that is what you have come to tell me?"

Margery nodded assent.

"You mean that you will arrange this plan that suits yourself, with your friend, the captain, so soon as you get home."

"If you like to put it so," Margery returned, carelessly.

"Your friend will do a lot to please you," Aletta said tauntingly, furious at the outcome of the visit.

There was a note of fierceness in the retort:

"I won't stand idly by while you and Bouwer plot how best you can keep George with the commando—how best you can detain him there month after month till they have had a big engagement with the Irregulars—how best you can goad him into shooting, or being shot—a bullet through his back for choice!"

Margery's low-toned vehemence pierced the density of the Boer woman's insensitiveness. She shrank before the bitter, cutting tones, the telling accusation; then gathered up her courage and plunged afresh into the fray of words.

"*Almachtig!* Margery Brandon, are you mad? Have you gone quite crazy with your suspicions of every one of us where George is concerned? Shame upon you for using such words to your brother's wife! And as for keeping me a prisoner, no doubt your friend will do that and more to please you, for he's your lover—I saw that long since, when you were here together, and so I told George. Yet take care; all women have their price; all men claim their reward——"

"I can look after myself," Margery returned, her dark brows raised disdainfully. "It's you who must be guarded—for George's sake."

"Then arrange for Johanna to be sheep-dog," Aletta shrilled. "I'll have no other."

"Poor Jo!—what good could she do?"

"Babble to Thane—she's dust under his feet, and you know it."

Margery shook her head frowningly.

"I know nothing of the kind . . . I hear what you say and what you put into her mouth to say, but Thane is no such blackguard as you would make him out to be. Jo must be kept from pestering him. If she is allowed off du Bruyn's Rust she'll find a way to get plaguing him again."

"Plaguing him, indeed! since when has Thane to be so specially considered?"

"Thane is not himself since George left," his sister returned, steadily. "I'll not have him bothered."

"Doesn't he spend half his time fighting like the very fiend with those devils, wild as himself?" Aletta questioned mockingly. "A Boer is to him much the same as a red rag to a bull. But have your own way, you masterful creature; I'll consent to put up with your supervision provided you get the officer-in-charge down there to allow Jo to be with me as well. I'll keep her tied to my apron-strings, I promise you, Margery, quite safely out of Thane's way. Go now, my *schoen-sister*," she sneered, "go and arrange the matter thus, like a dear, good girl, with the men who war against women."

"I am going now, Aletta," Margery responded, turning as she spoke and moving towards the doorway, "but remember this—if ever Bouwer is seen about here again, when I return it will be to stay."

"Captain Woodward would be desolated, I am sure!" her sister-in-law called tauntingly after her.

IV

THAT gentleman, as he stood beside the stream—absorbed in the whisperings of the coming of love and the garnering of a great and precious store of life's truest, highest happiness—listened intently for the first sounds that should announce the coming of the woman he loved. Then he heard the step he had long awaited, caught the faintest swish of her muslin skirts brushing the grass-grown sides of the track, and experienced with a sense of ever-fresh amazement the wonder that a time had ever been when he had remained deaf and insensible to her approach and presence.

Through the dim light Margery moved softly to his side. He turned with a quick, glad movement. In his hands held out to her, in his eyes as they swept over her face, she recognized the truth of the oft-confessed tale of the strong, abiding love this man bore for her ; and while the knowledge brought to her that thrill, as of some new, sweet music beating to the tune of life, it brought also that sense of fear and distrust of any good life might offer her ; that remembrance from the past, stealing over her, rendering her too intimidated and absorbed to be fully alive to the sense of quick, up-springing emotion re-animating her frame.

Slowly, in that deep centre of her soul where she had so long agonized in solitude, the capacity for emotion, long since crushed and battered out, stirred anew and thrust itself insistently upon her senses. As he stood before her now—sympathetic, magnetic, forceful—she

felt once again that romantic quality of existence which had so intimately presented itself to her in the past. Her pulses once more started beating steadily to the tune of life—a sane, healthy, human life.

“You are late,” Woodward said, as with a quick, insistent gesture he drew her hands within his. “How long the afternoon has seemed without you!”

“Poor Babs!” she returned, lightly. “She seemed to be doing her level best for your entertainment. I watched you both from up there.” She pointed her umbrella mountain-wards.

“I had my work cut out slipping off without her, dear child—Heaven bless her sweet, sharp eyes! I thought I should never have got the chance, but at last fortune was kind. Come, let us sit down for a bit.”

But Margery drew together her straight, dark brows in thoughtful consideration.

“It is getting late——” she began, but he interrupted her with such a determined: “Not a bit of it,” that she relented, and crossing the bridge sank down among the mosses and grass on the opposite bank of the stream, throwing off her straw hat and baring her face and head to the cool, languorous air of the summer night.

“Just for five minutes, then; I really am tired, and it will give you time for a smoke. Now, what was it you particularly wanted?” she asked, in a careless, elder-sisterly tone—the tone she invariably adopted towards him.

He lay stretched on the grass at her feet as he puffed at the cigarette he had taken from his case, content for the time being with her near presence which alone had the power to bring a deep, intense satisfaction to his soul. That she refused to listen to his words of love, that she invariably treated these sentiments with studied indifference or disdain, that she held intact the inner entrance to her heart, did not altogether discourage him, since he had for some time past perceived signs of the process of a thaw—slow, but evident—which had certainly begun

its work of melting the iron-bound frost that had chilled and warped the current of her blood.

His tones, tender yet masterful, came pleasantly to her ears :

"What I particularly want? Well, this; don't you think I have been sufficiently patient? Haven't you kept me long enough in suspense?"

She raised her dark eyebrows, a faint smile—disdainful, puzzling—crept round her red lips; her eyes, as they studied his upturned, questioning face, were inscrutable, while from their deep setting they flashed their greenish-grey glances steadily into his.

"Oh! Is that it, Phil,"—for so, at his request, she had grown to address him, while to him she was "Miss Margery" in public, and "Margery" when he was alone with her. A softer look stole over her face, then she confessed: "It is such a comfort to have someone to talk to—someone who understands; and I should miss you very, very much." Her low, bell-toned voice mingling with the voice of the stream as it rippled and purled and plashed over the stones of its gravel-bed was added music in his ears. He turned on his side and caught her hand.

"That is it; and you must listen to me," he said, masterfully.

"I am tired," she repeated, her eyes magnetizing his senses as she sat, her hand in his, looking down upon him, "and you are so restful; it is such a comfort to have you to talk to when mind and soul, and brain and body, all are aching and weary; yet, Captain Woodward, I'll resign that comfort rather than sit here listening to words of love."

"And why?" he demanded sharply, struggling with the wild desire to take her in his arms; wondering whether he might risk it—risk her anger, and amaze, and disdain.

But she was speaking, still in that softer key:

"Because it would not be honest."

"You are honesty itself," he said, quickly.

"But were I to encourage your love—knowing that I

could not return it—would that be honest ? ” she asked, slowly.

“ *Could* not ? ” he questioned, striving to read her face, to interpret her heart, to fathom her soul.

She was silent. Something in the question as he put it, something unprecedented and forceful in his bearing and look, stimulated and challenged her imagination. She saw before her the tall, muscular, wiry-looking man with bronzed face and iron-grey eyes ; recognized in his personality that strength and determination of character which nothing could ruffle or turn aside from its set purpose. Of the kindliness of his nature she had long had abundant proofs ; of his resources in difficulties, of his willing service for others, she was abundantly assured. He was her friend—her close, intimate friend ; the man she could admire, esteem, appreciate. He was clever, kind, sincere, trustworthy. And—he was at her feet ; pleading for the gift of her love, for the gift of that long-stifled, unemotional treasure—her sunless heart.

Might it be possible, after the bitter tragedy of the past, after the dull, grey years of monotonous drudgery, that life indeed held precious balm for her ? Again her soul and mind conceived the idea that the future might still hold for her something indefinable, intangible, yet rare and precious. Again hope raised its head and a sense of quiet, forceful, mysterious content, a feeling which surpassed elation, filled her whole being, stealing like a note of vague, unseen, but intensely-realized music—deep-sounding and soul-satisfying—across the greyness of her long prison-bound senses.

He had drawn nearer to her, his hands still holding hers against his breast, his face close to hers as he asked searchingly :

“ It is not ‘ *could* not,’ is it, Margery ? You *could* return my love ? You do, thank God, you do ! ”

His lips against hers frightened her, his arm around her terrified her. With a white face she moved from him restlessly, as she breathed half-beseechingly, half-questioningly :

"Love is very beautiful—if the Fates are kind . . . and I suppose we all grasp out after it—that's only human. But I must not think of it . . . I ought not to think of it—at least," she concluded hesitatingly, "at least, not yet; don't ask me . . ."

His keen eyes watched every line of her face. Her agitation did not escape his notice. Beneath the lowered lids he saw the unmistakable dawn of that new hope and new happiness which was filling her heart and soul, sweeping through all the forces of her being as a swift, irresistible tide, impossible of repression. She loved him, he felt, and his heart beat forcefully at the knowledge now suddenly revealed to him. The muscles of his arms were tense in the struggle between the growing desire to keep them still and the more powerful desire to seize upon her, breaking her scruples to his will by the might and power of his physical strength. Yet, bearing in mind her plea "not yet," and conscious that such was her sincerely heartfelt wish, he crushed the overwhelming personal desire, and answered with the tenderness which had captured the impregnable fortress of her heart :

"Dearest, you ask me and I must obey—but on one condition only," the masterful note again crept into his voice, "that you will not make the 'not yet' longer than to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" she was startled and showed it.


They both rose and faced each other.

"Let us say to-morrow," Woodward said, quietly. "I love you, dear, with all the strength of my manhood; I love you as I never thought it was in me to love; and I believe—and if I am wrong you will tell me—but I believe most convincingly and emphatically that you return my love. We have lived six months under the same roof," he continued seriously, as she stood with lowered gaze before him, her brows drawn together as in thought, "I won your friendship with difficulty—your love with immeasurably greater difficulty; but I have won it?—it is mine, is it not, dear? You are too honest-hearted to

evade the truth . . . too noble-hearted to pretend—to play with a man—you will answer me honestly to-morrow?”

She lifted her eyes to his. Her face with the dark mask drawn over it, her set features, her air of supreme unconsciousness puzzled Woodward, and for a moment he knew not what to think. She saw that he was troubled, perplexed, irritated; that he was examining her afresh. His uncertainty, his irritation, his look searching her body and soul, was balm to her heart, for in these signs she read the strength and intensity of his love for her. The love and devotion of this strong, deeply-reserved nature had been given her—a gift from heaven. She could have fallen on her knees before him. A smile, pure and sweet, passed over her face and lighted up her deep-set, gleaming eyes. With that smile Woodward triumphed with the joy of a strong man's forceful intensity. In it he read that she loved him, worshipped him, desired him, lived for him.

But: “To-morrow,” she said pleadingly, holding him back; and through the solitude of the warm southern night, tranquil and effulgent, filled by silence and the silver of the moonlight and the stars, they passed up the fruit-laden orchard and through the garden—heavy with the scent of strange, odorous perfumes—to the door of the post-house.



V

THAT night, as Margery lay wakeful, her hand touching the child's, a new vision of herself came to her—she could not define how or why. She saw herself as she must have appeared in Woodward's eyes during the days and weeks and months of their close acquaintance, during the whole of the time they had spent together in the familiar intimacy of family life passed under the roof of *The Outspan*. She saw herself as he must have seen her—carelessly cold, sharply disdainful, wilfully ungracious, systematically indifferent. She saw herself thus in the fierce, scorching light of self-revelation, and the pain and humiliation of that vision were well-nigh unbearable.

The stubbornness before which her proud heart had refused to unbend, the bitterness which had eaten like a canker into the core of her warm, true nature, had caused her thus to conceal from the man her true self. With purpose and intent she had hidden that better, truer self from him, and had put his patience to impossible tests; and when at times, after some intolerably-scornful repulse on her part, they had drifted asunder for days together she had secretly blamed him for not knowing better, for not discerning through those symptoms of biting acrimony the real woman looking even then, though unconsciously, to this man to whom her soul, by the mysterious forces which govern individual life, was gradually becoming knit in bonds eternal. Now she realized the utter impossibility of his perceiving what she had hidden so carefully.

She realized how impossible it had been for him to catch a glimpse of her real, true self; and bitter remorse that she should so unjustly have blamed him, while, at the same time, so consistently thwarting his invariable kindness and rejecting with cold disdain his unobtrusive devotion, swept over her senses—humiliating and torturing her.

"I blamed him for everything," she told herself fiercely, recalling those days when she had suffered deeply because of the break between their friendship caused by her coldness and unbearable ungraciousness; "I was a fool—I believed myself a martyr; I blamed him for everything that caused a jar between us!"

She was bitter in her self-accusation, fierce in her self-condemnation. She asked herself: "Why did I do it? . . . I liked the man, yet always it seemed as though it were forced upon me to show him my worst side."

That she had done so consistently, persistently, she recognized, but could not reason why. Yet she had loved him with all the strength of her warm, loving heart; with all that vast depth of feeling so essentially her bane. The while she had rejected his love, she had never questioned her reason for thus deceiving Woodward as to her real nature and true self. But on this night of self-revelation, following upon his appeal and her partial acceptance of that appeal, when it was granted to her to see the clear vision, the lack of which had led to a cramping of her soul and a crushing of the noblest instincts of her nature, Margery Brandon, as she lay looking with eyes darkened by pain into the blackness of the night, was constrained by the workings of her spirit to search after the reason for her illogical treatment of Woodward, and the true reason for her conduct instantly presented itself before her—appalling and intimidating her.

There was method underlying this same apparently illogical conduct, as she recognized. He was not to blame, nor was she. Circumstances, she told herself bitterly, the irony of fate, the tragedy that follows us through

life, the consistent crookedness and contrariness of things in general, the crime of a man more feeble than wicked, more fool than villain—all these were to blame for the situation that had forced itself upon her. What was her present position, she asked herself; and acknowledged that, in the existing state of society, according to the accepted conventions in the world in which she moved, she would stand condemned, exiled and banned, as the unmarried mother of a child, though through no fault or sin of her own—through ignorance, heedlessness, wilfulness only. She drew Babs' small, plump hand to her mouth, pressing her hot lips against it. The child was dear to her, though the father—the man who had shared that blissful, disastrous honeymoon of ten years since; the ardent, impetuous young wooer, who had married her heedless of the bar to their legal union—was now nothing more than a visionary personage of some half-forgotten, ghost-haunted dream.

Babs, she had sworn—and she was resolved at all costs to hold to her oath—Babs never should suffer for the mad folly and indiscretion of those youthful days. Babs never should be known to a cruel, heartless world as nameless; not even to this man who had sought and won her love.

With her dark secret locked in the grave of her dead mother, and secure as in a living tomb within the heart of her faithful brother—the two who had come to her aid in her trouble—Margery felt that she need have no uneasiness in regard to its upheaval, to its ever coming to light, unless by some act of madness on her part, such as the giving of herself to another. And now she recognized the hour of this madness was at hand. The man who loved her, the man whom, despite her utmost endeavours to the contrary, she had grown to love, awaited on the morrow her answer; and how to answer him she knew not.

This, then, was the reason why instinct had bade her treat him with coldness, with disdain, with rudeness; had bade her hide from him her true, real self. The mother's

instinct within her had bade her beware lest the secret of her child's nameless birth should be compelled by the power of passion from her reluctant lips. Yet Margery vowed such should never be; rather would she renounce her love for Woodward; rather would she reject the sweetness of the love offered her . . . yet this again she could not bring herself to contemplate.


How should she answer him on the morrow? She could see herself standing before him—dull, enigmatic, graceless, cold—as she lifted a masked face and veiled eyes to his strong, eager face. She could see him before her—masterful, tender, patient, devoted—as he looked down with eyes searching and anxious, piercing to the depths of her lonely, brooding soul.

Suddenly her burning eyeballs smarted with the flow of salt tears. Bitter tears damped her cheeks, falling silently on to the pillow. She longed intensely for another chance for happiness. Was not this man worth loving? she asked herself, passionately. Could she not make amends to him for her silence as to that tragedy of the buried past over which a veil must ever rest?

Babs, she would certainly never betray. Her secret should remain her own, she vowed in headstrong, wilful fashion. *That* she would never disclose, never surrender. George, of course, would urge upon her to do so; to him it would seem right that a woman should confess to the man she was taking as husband so important a page of her past life; but, then, George was always such a boy for doing the straight thing, for doing what was right. But she would laugh at his scruples, would persuade him to allow her to act as she thought best; and never would he, with his fond, true love for his sister, stand in the light of this great flood of new-born happiness which was to re-create the world for her, to fill and satisfy her long-burdened soul with that best, good gift of perfect union—the best gift that life has to offer to humanity.

Slowly it dawned upon her that she had formed her decision as to the answer she would make to Woodward

on the morrow. She would give him such a reply as should draw them together man and wife in strong, consoling and soul-satisfying union for the future years of life; that would leave no sting, no fruitless repining, no separation through those years to come. By the light of her freshly-acquired knowledge she craved the opportunity of shaping her life aright; of setting herself in true perspective in the eyes of this man; of making his life of inestimable worth to him. *If it might be!* She reached out timidly after this new vision of possible happiness in order to look more closely upon the light of its face. With the dark face of sorrow she was well acquainted. Now she was emboldened by this confession of mutual, abiding love to believe that at long last fortune was indeed about to smile upon her. She felt uplifted, elated, inspired, as once before in those far-off years of her girlhood, by an unreasoning joy of life. The romance of life presented itself insistently before her, and she tasted once more of that strange magic underlying the material and the prosaic. Nothing was changed, yet nothing remained the same. . . . All was new . . . She was again a girl—loving and beloved—and she fell into dreamland with Woodward's touch and look and presence enfolding and surrounding her.



VI

SHE sat on the old wicker-couch in the shade of the creeper-covered verandah, over whose trellised sides a riot of red and white roses climbed in profusion ; the familiar basket of mending on the table before her, her veiled eyes still searchingly bent on discovering the rents and thin places in the garments which she busily patched, or at which she industriously darned. Her straightly-marked, heavy eyebrows, her dark hair, her deep-set, gleaming eyes, all stood out in striking contrast against the soft whiteness of her loose muslin blouse with its low-cut, frilled collar revealing the contours of the shapely throat and neck that rose column-like above the graceful, womanly figure.

With the impassiveness wiped from her face, the apathy swept from her heart, she appeared to Woodward—who, in shirt-sleeves, sat on the edge of the table, his eyes down-bent to hers—as one grown young and vigorous and lusty after a full mid-tide of sickness which had aged and withered body and soul. Was she indeed the woman—so old-young, so tired, so indifferent, so uninteresting and uninspiring—who on his first appearance at The Out-span had set before him his first repast ? She was ; and that the power of love—his love for her—had wrought this miracle of change, bringing back to her face and bearing their former youth and vigour and comeliness, and to her spirit healing and happiness, raised within him a passionate intensity of joy.

All around them lay a great silence ; masters and servants toiled at the harvesting in the fields while the

sweltering heat of the early summer morning still lay upon the land. Old Lisbeth—crooning a low, sibilant strain over her pots and pans in the kitchen—was the only human creature within sound or hail. Even Babs had been lured by promise of a ride on the old black pony to remain under the trees in the harvest field, within sight of the reapers, while Woodward, on the plea of fetching drinks for the busy harvesters, had returned unhindered to the post-house.

The drinks had been duly forwarded by a couple of piccaninnies, but Woodward still lingered in the shade of the rose-scented, deep-shadowed verandah, his ears drinking in the low, sweet tones as Margery confessed in broken snatches :

“It is true . . . I made a miserable riddle of myself—not to you only, but to everyone about me—chiefly to men—most particularly to men who seemed to care for me . . . I hated the idea of love.”

“And I was one of those same,” he said, raising her hand to his lips, “and you have given *this* to me, my enigma! my dear, cruel, crafty riddle! And you are in love with love?”

They both laughed, both felt the truth of his words. But while the woman hugged to her bosom the key to the riddle which still puzzled him, the man merely perceived that though he had gained the precious gift of her love, much within that intense, silent nature was shut out and hidden from his sight and comprehension. Deep within her deep-set eyes lay that which told of a past experience of which he could form no conception, save that it had been an experience of unprecedented strength and forcefulness—lasting in its effects, crushing in its aftermath. Yet, since it was of the past, and since he had cured her of the life-in-death sickness under which she had fallen prone and had gained the precious gift of the love of this forceful, passionate heart, this strong, true nature—why, Woodward asked himself, should he strive to tear aside the veil of reserve with which she cloaked whatever tragedy or sorrow, or succession of

long-continuous sorrows or misfortunes, that past held for her ?

Her hand resting in his, her eyes upturned to his thoughtful, down-bent face, he was listening to the musical tones so inexpressibly dear to him.

" I had gone through so much trouble . . . had drunk so often of the cup of bitterness—I don't want to speak of those old sores, to rake up past sorrows ; but, dear, I so much want you to understand. Can man's nature ever really comprehend woman's ? Has God made this possible ? ' Yes,' do you say ? Then try and understand how this death-in-life frame of mind crept over me as one after another the troubles came tumbling about my ears, changing my very nature ; so that I stood by, as it were, watching the cruel process of transformation, watching myself change from a wilful, headstrong yet sympathetic, warm-hearted girl into a sarcastic, bitter, hardened woman ! I grew sarcastic, then hard—so bitterly hard . . . the world was wrong . . . I was a martyr . . . life held nothing but blanks . . . death was the only remedy—till then a grim holding on to things material was all that was left us ! "

" And you had no mother—no woman-friend—no lover to whom you could turn in your loneliness, my poor darling ? " Woodward said, in his deep, comfort-compelling tones, looking down steadily into those upturned, gleaming eyes.

But they never wavered.

" No mother and no lover ; yet both and more in George—he has been so much to me all my life long . . . and one of the troubles was when he left the old home . . . I had had him close at hand till then ; we had never been parted since the day I got back from boarding-school . . . George came down to Durban to meet the steamer in which I had sailed from Capetown . . . He brought me back with dear mother and Babs—then a baby of only three months."

" Your mother was with you in Durban ? "

She nodded.

"For nearly twelve months. That was the beginning of all our troubles—her health failed . . . she was an invalid after her return, never the woman she had been," a swift bitterness swept over her face darkening it with the old, heavy, formidable frown. "She used to lie out here most days; and helplessly, hopelessly, we four—father, George, Thane and I—used to watch her sweet life ebbing painlessly away . . . That was sorrow——"

The sting of that sorrow lay in the knowledge that it was the shock of the evil that had blighted her own young life on its threshold which had sown the seeds of death in the gentle bosom of her devoted mother. But of this she could not speak.

"That was hard, my darling; I can sympathize," Woodward said tenderly, and Margery understood that he referred to the loss of his own parents.

"*But you had not to suffer the torment of knowing that your wilfulness had killed your mother.*" She could have hurled the words at him from those red lips against which his own were pressed. But that would have been to reveal the secret, and so to lose him; to have spoken these words would have been as the act of a maniac perishing of thirst, who would dash from his parched lips the cup holding salvation. Margery, instead, accepted the sympathy, the love, the tenderness of her lover as the thirst-maddened, dying wanderer in the parched desert would accept the liquid drops of the cool, clear water—life-restoring, life-giving—clutching at these as his sole hope of salvation.

"I had the care of Babs always—from the very first," she said, slowly. "She knows no other mother."

"You have been a mother to her; Heaven gave her to you for your comfort, dearest."

Her face paled, her eyes grew enigmatic.

"I am a mother to her," she said, "and Phil—" she laid her hand restrainingly on his arm—"you have been talking about wanting to marry me, but the man who marries me has to take Babs along with me."

"But, of course, dearest; Babs shall never leave us till she goes to her husband's home. Don't think you'll get rid of me in that way, Margery," he laughed, moving to sit beside her on the couch and drawing her within his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder, intoxicated by the joy of his near presence.

"Forget the past with its dark hours," he urged. "Think of our future together; of the love that will brighten life for you—for both of us. We know trouble must come, but love atones; my love to you for all the evils of the past, dearest."

She clung to him as though she feared to lose him.

"Oh, Phil, I do think of it, and it frightens me . . . your love has come to mean so much to me . . . I could not sleep last night for thinking how much you mean to me . . . and something dark and evil kept whispering in my ears, and in my heart, that I should lose you—that this gift of happiness wasn't for me . . . and I was miserable . . . I longed so intensely to have the chance of telling you all that was in my heart, of letting you know how I had loved you through all this time past when I have showed you only my worst side . . . I thought: 'Before morning he will have repented; he will have seen his folly and changed his mind;' and I longed for the dawn to bring the morning, yet dreaded what this morning might bring."

Her head was lifted, her eyes were tracing every line of his face, every curve and contour of his well-moulded features, every look she recognized, cherished and dwelt upon. He was a lover worth having. Before the magnetism of his near presence she was unable to fathom the magnitude of this precious cup of salvation held to her parched lips. She was again the inexperienced girl, grasping at the mystery that hides beneath the surface of all things; captivated, and intimidated, and fascinated by that overwhelming magic of life which again with greater insistence was thrusting itself upon her. The gleam in her eyes, the smile on her lips, dazzled and intoxicated the

sober-natured, level-headed Woodward and, as she looked up at him, something hitherto unknown within his experience of himself—a passion, rough and deep and beyond himself—swept over him, teaching him his own capacity for love. With a low murmur he drew her closer within his arms, pressing fervid kisses on that pale, impassioned face.

“Change my mind! Give you up! Margery, don’t utter such heresy! Don’t lie awake thinking such absurdities! ‘Give you up?’ when you are the woman I have waited for all through the long past years! How lonely and empty and starved they seem to me, now—since I have known you! And to think I have been led across ocean and continent to this far-off, solitary corner of the Transvaal backveldt to find you! God has been good!” he exclaimed, reverently. “He has brought us together to fulfil our lives! Without each other, our lives must remain incomplete. Think of all life will mean for us—for you and me together, my dearest? You have taught me what love means—how a man has it in him to love! I love you as a man loves a woman, with all the force and strength of his manhood. Don’t you understand what you are to me, Margery?—the woman I must love, come what may—nothing can make any difference to that.”

“*Nothing!*” she hugged her secret to her breast.

There were tears in her gleaming eyes; a deep, sweet note of joy echoed through her low bell-tones.

“Phil, love like ours can’t end with life—there must be a world beyond this!”

Proud-natured, iron-willed as she was, yet in this hour of her confession of the strength of the love she bore him her pride lay trampled in the dust beneath the force of that strong passion. Her lofty disdain, her fierce independence, her implacable reserve, all were cast aside and she was simply a woman, loving tenderly and openly and unashamedly, just in the same womanly fashion as others of her sex at whom, in the days of her hardness of heart, she had mocked and scoffed.

VII

IT was a week later. Aletta had obtained her wish, and had got Jo settled in with her at the Top Farm. She made no outspoken objection to Margery's frequent presence there. Babs, because of some hard words against Thane which Aletta had spoken in her presence—and which the child had instantly and openly and vehemently resented—had declined ever after to continue her share of the daily visits to be paid to George's home. It fell, therefore, to Margery's lot to keep guard.

"I can't feel sure that my threat about Boucher being arrested as a spy, if he was seen about, has really frightened him off," she told Thane, on her return late one afternoon.

Her brother's heavy brow creased into a frown. Seldom, indeed, would he bear patiently the slightest reference to George. Indeed, throughout those days and months of suspense, his temper so instantaneously flared into so fierce a flame of heat upon the slightest provocation, that no one except Margery ever cared to face its fury.

He strode half-way down the passage, then turned, with a pale anger on his swarthy face, to breathe hotly in her ear :

"If that damn scoundrel's been there, I'll have it out of Jo."

"Thane!—then you've been seeing her?" Distress was in Margery's tones. "Aletta promised she'd keep her from you."

"Seen her!" he repeated, fiercely; "when she comes creeping—every chance she gets—along the river below

the lands, or up the garden as often as not if those damn sentry's eyes are turned the other way. Dash it all! can I stir without seeing her? Can I get up or lie down without seeing her? It's your fault; you put her at the cottage; you insisted on her going there——"

"To help George," Margery interrupted, angrily. "Thane, it's cruel and wicked of you! It's abominable——"

He caught her up sharply. "What's that?" he growled.

"Thane, aren't we in trouble enough as it is, with this endless war—and George kept out there?" she questioned, imploringly. "Oh, Thane, if you would but try and get over this stupid, mad temper; this raging against everyone and everything about you! How can that help? The war is a horror, an unspeakable curse—we all know it, and it hurts us all—but we've got to bear it . . . Only to help George—that's all I think of; and, Thane, if you were in your right senses, acting as a man should act, you would be helping me to get him back and to keep Aletta from getting into mischief, so that he may find all well when he gets back; instead of going on as you are doing, acting like one possessed, and fooling still after that poor girl——"

The rage, boiling in his heart, was puffing out the veins in his throat and temples till they stood tense and sharp as swollen whip-cord; his eyes shot fire. "Damnation!" he growled. "Women have no sense!" Then his voice sank lower. "Can't you see I'm keepin' in with the girl *for George's sake*?" he asked, vehemently. "How otherwise are we to find out about Bouwer, and the devilish scheme he and that hell-cat up yonder are planning together? You'd prefer that they run George into a noose, would you? Damn it all! are *you* the only one who thinks for him?"

Then, flinging himself on his heel, he was gone, muttering darkly. Margery followed him as he strode from the house across the front yard to his bedroom. She stood in the

low doorway opening into the little apartment, watching his impatient movements as he flung himself here and there about the room.

"Thane, don't get angry with me ;" she implored, "after all, we must work together, you and I. You are the only one I can turn to . . . of course, I know you are just as anxious about George as I am."

"Not a rap!" he swore, flinging things about in all directions as he collected his belongings. "Why the hell should I be anxious over a fellow who has coolly ridden off to shoot down his—here, steady, Margery ; what the devil are you up to ?"

For she had flown at him in a fury.

"Thane, I won't allow even you to utter such vile lies of George."

"Well, then, clear out of my room ! Who asked you to come here, riling me ? What the plague you women are !—for ever hanging on to a man, tormenting him like the very fiend !"

He flung his coat over his arm, snatched up his pipe from the table, felt after his tobacco-pouch, and pushing past his sister in the doorway strode off in the direction of the corn-lands.

The wearied reapers were preparing to wend their homeward way after the labours of the long day. Thane kept such of them as could be spared from the evening duties in the farm-yard, setting them afresh to the work in which he took a hand, working like one demented until, darkness descending, men and master were obliged to desist. When at last they trudged back to the homestead—grumbling to each other that the young baas had turned slave-driver, and wishing unanimously for the return of the elder brother—he lingered behind until the little party were well out of sight and hearing. Then whistling a tune, low and insistent and oft-repeated, he made his way across the stubble of the shorn fields to the river-side.

Knee-deep among the swaying rushes on the opposite bank stood a woman's form. The light dress quickly

betrayed her. "She's there, sure enough—waiting on the chance of my going home along the river-path," thought Thane, and to save the walk up to the bridge, over which he might cross to her dry-shod, he stooped down and pulled off his *veldtschoen*, then prepared to wade the stream at a shallow spot.

Johanna, following his every movement, rushed to the very edge of the water to meet him, and while his feet and ankles were still washed by the ripple of the stream her outstretched hands and arms encircled him. His coat flung over his bared arms, the shoes held in his hands, he did not attempt to return her embrace. Instead, he threw back his head defiantly while with a strange, forbidding look in his dark eyes he gazed intently into her face—paler and thinner now than on that evening when she had trampled with set purpose upon her higher instincts and finer feelings, and had given the reins to her wild, soul-searing passion in her bold determination to bind her lover by the simple, human, but all-powerful tie of nature's relationship.

Yet, though paler and somewhat thinner than on that memorable evening, Johanna's face in its new aspect of tragic suffering appeared a thousandfold more attractive and more alluring to the fierce, sombre eyes of the man obsessed by the passion and tragedy of his life—a tragedy which had overtaken him through the very force of the love he bore to his brother and to the Dutch girl; and which had overwhelmed him, leaving him no further room in his imaginings for all the nobler qualities at which he once had aimed steadily, but which in these last months of fury and torture he had trampled deliberately beneath his feet. As he gazed down upon her in silence she, too, noted that he was changed, that his face was sharpened, and that there were lines about his eyes which told of sleepless nights and tortured days. They were in sympathy, co-mates in suffering, and the thought brought to Johanna's desolate heart a strange sense of relief and elation. Thane had not forgotten her, had not ceased to

love her, despite his savage repulses on the few occasions when she had been enabled to steal unseen by watchful eyes into his presence. He, too, she recognized, tortured by suffering, had trampled upon the finer feelings of his nature; had indulged deliberately in giving the reins to those senseless, savage outbursts of fury that had hitherto lain dormant, held in check within the depths of his fiery nature. Had she but known it, Thane had entered already upon the downward course which George had dreaded for him. There was more of the brute than the man in him as he had strode through the corn-lands towards the girl who held his passion. The sufferings entailed by the war had changed him—mentally, morally, and physically—during the past six months, almost beyond recognition.

Johanna was a well-grown woman, but though she lifted herself to full height, pulling him towards her, she failed to touch with her own the thickly-bearded lips of the young Hercules before her. She fell back with a little cry; but:

“What are you doing here, Jo? You’ll be getting yourself into trouble if you come hanging about here after dark,” was all he said coldly, pushing past her as he spoke.

She clasped her hands together in an outburst of vehement protest; but Thane, apparently paying not the slightest heed to her distress, sat himself down upon a tuft of the bowed bulrushes growing upon a higher ridge of the bank, and with slow deliberation proceeded to draw on his foot-gear. Then he stretched himself at full length upon the sandy, grass-grown stretch of sward fringed by the rushes and bordered overhead by a line of low-growing thorn bushes. The pungent odours of the soft cushions of their golden blooms was wafted gratefully to his tired senses. A flowering *avont-bloem*—its pure white loveliness unseen by mortal eyes—flung insistent whiffs of overpowering, perfumed sweetness through the languorous night to where the young man brooded darkly,

stretched on his side, Johanna standing apart, disconsolate and wretched.

The silence between them was broken by his voice.

"Sit down, Jo . . . here, girl, a bit nearer—so," he slipped an arm round her, pulling her with a rough movement that comforted her within his easy embrace. She put her head down on his shoulder and the hot tears fell and trickled on to his rough, sun-browned hand. His heart, not wont to relent, was touched by the feel of those tears. After all, he told himself, excusingly, she could not help being a Boer . . . that was no fault of her own making . . . yet he had been hard on her, as though she had played a trick upon him—had changed toward him—or given her love to another.

"There, there, Jo, give over, girl." Margery would scarcely have recognized his voice of the late afternoon, in this low, tender, love-fraught appeal. "See, it is Thane by your side. . . Crying in my arms, are you, little woman?" But Jo, still weeping bitterly, crouched head downward upon his shoulder, so that Thane, in desperation, sat up, and taking her bodily within his mighty arms she lay cradled upon his broad breast, crushed within his powerful clasp.

"Jo," he presently whispered hoarsely, lifting his lips from hers, "you should have been loved as no woman ever has been loved—and this damned war has spoiled it all!"

Her sun-bonnet had fallen back from off her dusky hair, and Thane—as he gazed intently from heavy, down-bent brows upon the soft, smooth roundness of the pale cheek swept by the black lashes which veiled the fire and passion of those dark eyes; upon the rosy lips and white brow; upon the freshness and sweetness of all the womanhood of the world centred for him in the person and personality of Johanna du Bruyn—fell afresh under the spell of the exacting passion which enchained him to this daughter of the enemy. He was a hard man—one to whom forgiveness of an enemy came hardly—if at all. But he

was, too, a man of strong passions—the strongest was his sense of brotherliness with George, the intensest his sense of mateship with the Boer girl, the most violent his suddenly-conceived implacable hate against the Boer people. For this hate he held the war responsible; he cursed it as its fell nature stood revealed before him in this hour of his passionate desire for Johanna—of his iron determination to resist that desire. In this hour the *realism* of War in all its barbarity, its ruthlessness, its savagery, stood naked and apparent—divorced entirely from that crude, conventional idea of modern warfare entertained by the idealist or the unimaginative, living far from its actual presence, unable to conceive of its true conditions and vital consequences. Thane Brandon saw War—not painted realistically—but an actual and living Presence, standing immovable, stark and grim, across his path, hindering his desire; a monster whose merciless visage was blighting not only his life and Johanna's, but the life and prosperity and mutual welfare of their country and people; spreading ruin and devastation and suffering throughout the land; bringing unspeakable misery upon every homestead and family in the land. More than this, he visualized the baneful results of this conflict—the stirring to life of bitter hatred and cruel memories for the years to come between the two white races of the sub-Continent. He looked into his own heart, and felt the extent to which the war had raised and brought to the surface his own innate savagery. As with the individual so with the nation, he argued in savage mood; and told himself with a rough oath that he had better be up and going, for from henceforth, because of this actuality of the war, never could there be a coming together between himself and this daughter of the enemy; the “damned war,” as he had just told her, “had spoiled it all!”

■

VIII

BUT could he leave her? Could he give her up? As she lay there in his arms—they two alone with only the closing night about them; the sweet flower-odours stirring their senses, the ripple of the unresting stream a soft, strong voice of love—enticing, alluring, subduing, appealing to those deepest and most powerful and most responsive impulses inbred in human nature—Thane, pressing hot kisses upon those upturned lips and eyes, upon that white brow shaded by the blackness of the falling hair, felt his heart fail within him at the thought that he must resign her. Yet his was too strong a nature to glance at the possibility of going back upon his word; to break the vows his hot lips had uttered. In this moment of deepest passion and longing and desire, even as he felt himself carried away by the vehemence of his great love for her, by the sense of her utter surrender of herself to that love, Thane Brandon never for a moment glanced at the possibility of their union.

“The damned war had spoiled it all!” Yet, Johanna, under the spell of his presence, forgot for a time the deadly import of his words. Under his masterful touch she forgot to weep, and grew radiant and lovely beneath his down-bent, glowering, all-devouring gaze. With a low, faint sigh of happiness and indescribable content, her slim fingers were flung around his bared neck, drawing his face closer to hers. Her slumbrous eyes, glancing upward, black against the whiteness of her face, appeared as though

lit from within their swarthy depths by the unextinguishable fires smouldering low within the vast well of some cavernous volcano crater. Had he relented, she asked herself? Had love for her won this miracle? Had she drawn him to herself for her own lawful possession? The extraordinary bitterness which the war had awakened within him against her people recurred to her, and she doubted whether she yet held securely as her man this obdurate, implacable, yet dearly-desired co-mate.

"You won't give me up? You'll never again try to drive me from you?" she questioned, half-imploringly, half-triumphantly; for was she not in his arms?—and could she not feel the beating of the fiery pulses leaping within his veins; and discern the deep, shuddering thrill that stirred through the giant frame as her cool, red lips touched the hollow of the mighty chest that showed white as milk below the line marking the red-brown of the sun-kissed throat and neck? He caught her fingers in the old masterful fashion, crushing them unconsciously in his vice-like grip, and she laughed aloud despite the pain for that unconscious grip spoke in nature's own language of the depth and reality of his emotion. She held him captive against the mighty strivings of his iron will—this man for whom she had dared much.

"I am a starving beggar set before food that I may not touch—so I must starve and die, my girl—must starve and die, for I may not eat," he repeated doggedly.

She crept closer within his arms.

"But, why, Thane?—why?" she whispered as in supplication, "since you are the one man in the world for me—and since I am with you—why starve?"

"This hellish war!" he groaned. "It has put a bar between us, Jo—between your people and mine."

"Forget it, sweetheart," she implored. "This is life," she said, simply, "our love—the fulfilment of our love—our being together always as man and wife. What counts against that?"

"The war counts," he said, more in despair than anger.

"I'm not one of the forgettin' sort—not good at passing things over."

With a quick movement he put her from him. She looked up, trembling and forlorn; and heavily—as though against his will—he took her back within the close pressure of his arms, while his hot, sullen lips sought hers.

"Then you must forgive me for being a Boer," she implored softly.

But: "I am not good at forgiving," he returned in the same crushed tones. "I can think of nothing but you, Jo; yet I can think of nothing but the war—that separates us eternally."

"The war can't separate us—*life* can't separate us, for the passion of our love is in our blood," she insisted, with a low, emphatic conviction; "nor can death separate us, Thane, for we love, too, with our spirits—with all the mind, and heart, and soul within us."

"Our love is done for as far as this life goes, Jo," he said, hoarsely. "Don't rant, girl; we love as human beings, with every hot drop of the good red stream of blood flowing through our bodies, quickening us as natural man and natural woman . . . I speak for this life; I know nothing of any other."

"It isn't done for," she cried, passionately; "we shall spend the years together . . . I won't give you up! the war shan't take you from me! Oh, Thane! Thane! you'd never be so cruel as to let it come between us?"

He slipped his hand over hers.

"Jo, you must be content with seeing me . . . don't ask for impossibilities . . . you promised to be content if I came but this once . . . I am here—I know I ought not to be—but you asked and I yielded."

"Thane, it is hard—cruelly hard! Think of the months they have kept us apart."

"My own will kept us apart," he said, doggedly.

"You were cruel, inhuman," she sobbed. "Did you cast a thought to my trouble? Night and day, night

and day it is with me—a part of myself—a part of you—of us both . . . that is why I can't forget it."

He moved restlessly, while his brow darkened. He looked searchingly through the dim light on the white face pillowed upon his breast. Inwardly he cursed any complication that might arise to add to the already hideous nightmare of their ill-starred passion. Jo caught his glance, his frown, his restless movement, and understood.

"Thane, I'm not blaming you; I never should blame you—not even if the worst came to me. . . If fault there was, the fault was mine and never should I repent . . . no, sweetheart, I'm not built that way—like those women ashamed to have proved their love. . . We have loved in a big way, Thane, you and I—haven't we? Whenever I am most miserable away from you, I remember I have given freely, fearlessly, without asking or exacting promises from you, and it fills me with happiness. I say to myself: 'I grudged him nothing; my love wasn't a poor, stunted, puny little thing—it was as wide and deep and strong as it is possible for human love to be,' and when I think this, I am content."

"You loved me too well," he groaned, miserable at this fresh revelation of the strength of the love he must renounce. "Jo, little woman, I've been a brute to you—yet we must part."

"I tempted you, Thane . . . yet don't think I am sorry for that."

"What then?" he asked, moodily.

She slid to the ground at his feet and sat huddled against him, her cheek resting on his knees, her eyes upturned in a side glance to his brooding face.

"If the little one came," she said, slowly; "it would belong to us both, eh? English, like its father, yet the child of the Boer woman. That would make it right, Thane, eh?"

He started and shook her off, horror in his flaming eyes.

"'Right'! Damnation! Don't you complicate

things, Jo; don't try to be over-clever! I'm not a scrupulous man. . . If such a thing should be, I'd strangle it as readily as I'd squeeze the wind-pipe of a blind puppy! Don't you try and get round me by talk like that—there's no reason?" his big brown hand fell heavily on her shoulder. "There's no reason?" he questioned, fiercely.

Out of the set, white face the wide black eyes looked up defiantly into his. Then Johanna shrugged her shoulders and turned slowly away.

"Come back," he called, harshly. "Come back, Jo;" then he swore; then he caught her roughly by the arm, twisted her round, drew her forcibly against his breast and masterfully demanded forgiveness.

* * * *

It was half an hour later, and they were about to part.

"Then, as soon as George gets back, we'll be married?" she was repeating, in tones of low content.

"If George comes back" . . . That much Thane had conceded to her . . . In return he knew all—much for which he would never have asked. For, since Johanna had with deliberation chosen him as mate and husband—though as yet unbound by law of State or Church—with equal deliberation she had won him to the promise of marriage with a Boer woman conditional upon George's safe return by voluntarily imparting fullest information—not only upon the point of Bouwer's visits and news of George, but of the deeply-laid scheme whereby he was to be drawn into action in the big ambush which the burghers of van der Merwe's commando had secretly planned, whereby the Irregulars were to be entrapped, and cut up, and driven back from off the soil of the Northern Transvaal.

IX

WEARY, yet elated by a sense of success where George's interests were concerned—and by a sense of triumph to come, whereby the scheme to ambush and ensnare the Irregulars would be outwitted and turned into an ambushade of the wily Boer commando itself—Thane, after seeing Jo within sight of the lights twinkling from the open door of the Top Farm homestead, returned to the post-house. He sat long after supper and after the house was in darkness, smoking, and turning over in his mind Johanna's tale of the Boer plans. In seeking her that evening, he had not been actuated by any idea of worming from her news of such a nature. His sole idea in yielding to her request for a meeting had been prompted by the desire to learn news of his brother's welfare, to acquire any information that would lead to the capture of Bouwer, and to the frustration of any scheme afoot designed with the object of circumventing his brother's evident desire to return to his home.

Quite unconsciously, however, he had acquired precise information of a deep-laid plan on the part of the Boers, who were about to leave their safe retreat, and venture within range of the advancing forces. Unseen themselves, they were to open out a direct and withering fire upon the Irregulars as they passed the flank of the low ridges swelling away from the farmstead known as Venter's Hoek. Through means of their spies, they appeared well acquainted with the very day on which, as Thane knew,

the contingents following upon the heels of the Boers had arranged to pass the farmstead on their way north.

The information, he knew, even as it dropped from Johanna's red lips, was of a nature inestimable in its worth to the army of the Irregulars who were the most interested in the matter. Now, as he smoked, his heart bounded fiercely within him as he saw the revenge which, by speaking, he was able to bring upon the Boers. George, Johanna had learned from Bouwer, was to follow more slowly upon the swift drive of the main column of the commando. Therefore, reckoning that the Irregulars, aware of the Boer movements, could attack them twenty-four hours earlier than the hour planned by them for the ambush, Thane arrived at the conclusion that George, with van der Merwe and certain of those interested in the matter of transport, would certainly be far in the rear of the meeting-place of the belligerents. Once it became known that the commando had been beaten and dispersed, his brother would be at liberty to return unmolested.

Thane Brandon, at the bare thought of that return, hugged a new joy to his bleeding yet fiercely-embittered heart. If but George returned safely, he felt he could forgive all else, could overlook Johanna's nationality and find solace and comfort in her true, loving devotion.

It was his duty, he told himself, after he had thus threshed out the matter, to hesitate no longer because of the manner in which the information had been obtained but to lay it immediately before the authorities—before the officers of the contingent immediately concerned.

"Did you hear any news of George?" a low voice questioned. He turned, and saw Margery emerging from the darkness of the passage. The light from the small oil-lamp, turned low and burning dim from the distant side-table, flickered on her anxious face and caught at the red gleams in her dark hair hanging in a long, loose coil over her white wrapper.

Noiselessly she shut the door behind her, and came close to her brother's side. Thane laid his pipe on the

table. He felt it would be a relief to retail Johanna's story, and the consequent reflections which weighted his mind. The habits of a lifetime had made Margery the natural repository of the secrets of the family. It was to her that both the brothers turned in times of stress or trouble; her advice they recognized as invariably sound, her help invaluable, her sympathy assured and unfailing.

She stood silently listening, with downcast, attentive face, while Thane repeated in short, strong language the gist of the information he had acquired. When he ceased she remained silent, turning over in her mind his words as to the certainty of this early attack on the advancing Boer commando ensuring George's absence from the engagement between the rival forces. Like Thane, she rejoiced at the idea of the dispersion of the Boer commando, since that meant the return of her brother. With George safely back among them, with the confession of Woodward's love ratified and confirmed by its public acknowledgment, Margery felt that she could then venture to look openly in the face of her new-born happiness, to dwell with a certain sense of security upon those more favourable conditions of life opening out to her.

But George was still absent among the combatants, and the hour of sharp conflict loomed ominous and imminent. Her heart beat low with dread, she grew faint with fear, her brain reeled before the problem of securing George's safety.

"It's an infernal tangle," Thane's voice went on. "The girl let it out of her own free will and I know it, that's the mischief . . . *I know it*. Rather than sit tight and say nothing while a lot of our chaps get trapped and cut up, I'd blow my brains out . . . you see, Margery, the Boers would have them tight there—I know that part so well."

"You can't do it," she said, firmly, "you know this plan and you can't keep it to yourself. . . Think of George! I am thankful, Thane, when I think of him, that Jo had the courage and the goodness of heart to tell you of this

diabolical scheme . . . I shan't ever forget this service she has done us," she added, significantly; "she has thrown in her lot with us and we must stand by her."

"All very well . . . but this damned war," he grumbled, hesitatingly. Then his voice changed and he admitted somewhat shamefacedly: "I'd vowed to be done with her . . . this war had stirred up hell in me . . . But now—well, when George gets back I've promised we'll get tied up."

"Thane, I am glad you've promised her that . . . she deserves it . . . you have done right," she ventured to say. Then she turned to the business in hand. "You've not yet told any one?" she asked.

He understood that the question concerned the matter of moment, and replied:

"No, I've just been going through it in my own mind—just to make sure before putting our chaps up to this business of the attack on the Boers that it could be carried out without fear of George being mixed up in it . . . I'll tell Woodward first thing in the morning."

"Why not at once?" she suggested. "He may think it necessary to send on word at once to the camp."

Thane considered, then rose and moved heavily to the outer door.

"Very probably he'll be asleep," he said dubiously, turning in the doorway and facing his sister.

"But he won't in the very least mind the being disturbed," Margery urged eagerly. She followed him on to the verandah. "Hurry, Thane! I'll wait here, and you bring me word what he thinks had best be done."

Anxiety kept her moving—kept her pacing restlessly up and down the length of the verandah. It drove her into the open night; she wandered round the front premises, catching at intervals an echo of the men's voices as they conversed together in low, short snatches—questioning, debating. The night-breeze fanned her cheek, the stars lighted the hard, white road—the trail running to north and south of The Outspan—embedded in the wide-

reaching expanse of the veldt surrounding them on all sides, stretching to the limits of those far-off regions where man dealt death to brother-man, where deadly conflict worked its horrible havoc.

Sickened at heart, Margery, with violently overwrought senses, looked out over the stillness of the sleeping world around, groping after that feeling of ease and relief brought invariably by the contact around and about us in tangible form and shape of the familiar and the accustomed. Over the silent plains lay that profound, deep-breathing peace which can only be known far from the haunts of men. Yet beyond this scene of peace—redolent of eternity rather than of time—raged the murderous strife tearing asunder the heart of the country. War was hurtling out of existence the men of the Mother-Country and the men of the Mother-Land. By the hand of the one fell the sons of the other. Daily by shot and shell and bullet, by wounds and fever and disease, the toll of life was being taken; fair sons, brave brothers, gallant husbands and fathers—‘the best of all that Time’s full vintage prest’—all alike were falling victims to the ruthless, insatiable god of War. In vision she saw the battle-fields—great and small—the open wastes, the mountain defiles, the fertile, gently-undulating slopes and valleys and plains of her native land—on each and all alike was the terrible sight of men hunting down their brother-men. The cracked earth, the rocky soil, the rich pastures alike drank in the blood of its sons and the blood of the sons of the great Empire with whom they were at odds—the blood of humanity destroying humanity! Men made war; while women—the daughters of earth, the bearers of men—tongue-tied and lip-locked in this matter, looked helplessly on. Men were the destroyers of men; women bore men, yet sat voiceless and unheard in the council chambers of the nation while their co-partners planned war and war wasted and poured out upon the earth the fruit of their labour and travail. Men fought and slew, and conquered and died—gamely, gallantly, senselessly—but women, the mothers of

men, in darkened homes mourned because of the *waste*. "To what purpose was this waste?" they asked, mutely for they perceived that their labour and travail had been in vain—that their fruit-bearing had been harvested prematurely by the unsparing reaper, Death.

* * * *

Booted and spurred, Woodward came up to where she stood. "You were right," he said, taking her hand in his. "This news must be passed on at once."

"You are taking it?" she asked.

"To the camp," he replied, briefly. "I shall be back in time for breakfast."

She nodded; then glanced towards the stables where Thane was putting the saddle on Buller, his own particularly swift riding-horse.

"He's lending me Buller," Woodward smiled. "It's good of him! You go in and get some sleep, Margery," he added, suddenly changing his tone as he caught a glimpse of the look on the upturned face. "Don't get worrying . . . I'll look out that George gets through this business safely."

Her face lighted up.

"Phil! . . . I'm mad with fear—sometimes . . . if only George were safely back—it would seem too good to be true, the having you both," she added, simply.

He tightened his hold on her hand.

"You'll have us both, dearest."

The next moment he had released her; and standing by Thane's side she watched the dark shadow of man and horse as it disappeared, swallowed by the night.



X

IN the bar and on the stoep groups of khaki-clad men came and went throughout the hot summer morning, drinking, smoking and talking—always talking—discussing the latest war news.

On this summer morning the Boers were conspicuous by their absence; the officers and troopers of the various contingents of the Irregular forces now filled the seats of the enemy and partook of the hospitality of The Outspan.

"Report has it they are coming this way, and the Head has decided we go forward and give them a welcome," explained one eager-faced young trooper to Thane, who stood in his shirt-sleeves, a burly, silent figure among the chattering group.

"Must be something in it, eh, Brandon?" queried another, appealing directly to a comrade who had shown himself unequalled at the game of guerilla warfare.

Thane nodded, but said nothing though fully aware of the change in plans since he had learned from Woodward, on the latter's return, of the orders for an immediate shift to circumvent the ambush planned by the Boers.

"We'll get them on the run again," said the young trooper, eagerly. "*Almachtig, broers!*" he went on, jocularly twisting his tongue to the *taal*, "but it is *grand* when we get the chance to catch them in the open."

"See how splendidly we've cleared the whole of this immense district since we were sent up here not much over six months since," bragged a wiry, sun-browned

trooper. "Lord love you! where would the Reg'lars have been in this Transvaal back-veldt?"

"Lost—every mother's son of 'em!—lost, long ere this," scoffed his companions; and: "It takes a reg'lar bush-hand to travel over this 'ere ground," explained an old Australian, placidly.

"Mighty tough travellin' it is, too, Bill," added his friend. "I doubt whether we shall manage in the long run to stand exac'ly face to face with 'em."

"We'll do it if possible . . . we'll catch 'em in the open . . . it's beans we're goin' to give 'em this trip."

"Well, here's luck . . . luck to the chaps ahead of us . . . the man as is leadin' 'em won't stop to palaver or do the perlite when he comes up with 'em."

"Not he . . . poor chap! he's dead sick of their crooked little tricks! shot his pal, they did, in one of their damned ugly ways."

Then they were out again, springing to saddle and heading north. It was to the north all invariably turned, and Aletta, who from a point on the mountain-side had been watching throughout the morning the unusual activities in the camp of the Irregulars, began to be troubled by a smouldering suspicion of treachery.

She had missed her sister on the previous evening, yet Johanna, on her return, had flatly denied the insinuations cast at her, declaring stoutly that of Thane she had seen no sign.

"And I believed her," Aletta now told herself reproachfully. Thane, she had understood from the native spies whom she regularly employed, was still absent from the post-house. Under this belief she had failed to keep a strict watch over her sister. "I shouldn't have let her out of my sight," she repeated uneasily, remembering Thane's extraordinary influence over the girl and Johanna's knowledge of Bouwer's visits and news.

She hurried back to the house, but the culprit had wisely absented herself for the day recognizing the wisdom of avoiding any further cross-questioning once

Aletta's suspicions should be aroused; she, too, had noticed the riding to and fro between The Outspan and the three-mile-distant camp where the Irregulars were entrenched.

Failing to find her sister, Aletta—aghast and horrified by her now more thoroughly-awakened suspicions of treachery and by the ever-growing dread of the terrible results consequent upon any such treachery to the men of the commando—passed out again, taking the path down the mountain-side that led to the post-house. Before crossing the stream she halted, debating within her own mind as to the wisdom of bearding the lion in his den. One needed as much courage to attack that *duivel* of a Thane as to smack the face of the king of beasts, she thought whimsically.

But the gnawings of her suspicions drove her forward, heedless of consequences; and she crossed the rustic foot-bridge, calling aloud to Babs whom she detected crouching among the reeds and rushes at some little distance down-stream.

Rising out of her lair and followed by her boon companions, the terriers, Babs showed the liveliest interest in the advent of George's wife.

"Whatever are you doing down here?" she asked, in simply-direct if not over-polite fashion.

"Is Thane at home?" Aletta questioned in return.

Babs' calm eyes surveyed her innocently.

"Oh, you are going up to the house? Then I'll go along and see, since you've spoiled our sport; Sampson and Delilah were flushing partridges so cleverly, and I was the keeper. We were having such fun."

She raced the dogs up the pathway to Aletta's annoyance. "*Toch!* but it is an irritating child! I wanted particularly to get out of her since when Thane has been back . . . but she's too deep—or else she's been put up to it."

Margery, warned by Babs, was on the back stoep to greet her sister-in-law.

"Babs has gone to see if Thane is anywhere about," she said pleasantly; "but I expect he's off again."

"Again? Since when has he been back?"

Margery lightly shrugged her shoulders.

"He was here this morning——" she began, but Aletta interrupted stormily:

"You are all neck-deep in this business; where is one to learn the simple truth?" She pushed past Margery, "I'll find Thane, if he is to be found at The Outspan."

He was not to be found in his bedroom, nor in the stables—where she discovered the groom busily applying the curry-comb to the shining coat of the big, stoutly-built Buller, Thane's own riding-horse, and was thus confirmed in her idea that he had returned from his late expedition with the Irregulars; nor was he to be seen in the *zit-kamer*—into which she ventured to intrude her head, and was rewarded by a volley of stares from eager, darting eyes set in sun-reddened faces, owned by khaki-clad troopers who sat or stood about the bar quenching an insatiable thirst with *dop*, laager, lemonade, or tea, according to their habits and requirements. Aletta's face flushed angrily as she felt all eyes fasten curiously upon her while she stood irresolutely, striving to obtain an intelligible reply from the barman, who, of course, "couldn't exac'ly say . . . Mister Thane he might be about somewheres, but then again he mightn't be." In a quick flare of anger she slammed the door upon his lame conclusions, and passing the out-houses to the right of the building crossed the short intervening space of yard to the oblong, wooden shed, with its corrugated-iron roof and sheltering stoep. Standing in the open doorway of the big store-house, with its sacks of wool and bags of grain piled high in the background, she faced a group of men—her father-in-law, white-haired and stooping; Woodward, deep in converse with the sparely-built, iron-nerved leader of the advancing forces; a couple of officers belonging to the contingent; and beyond these, in his shirt-sleeves, sitting astride a deal packing-case, lounged the man she sought.

At sight of the woman's figure the low, serious tones of the men dropped to instant silence. Old Brandon, who gazed at his daughter-in-law as though uncertain of her identity, was the first to break the awkward pause.

"That you, Aletta? What's up?"

As he spoke he moved forward, blocking her further entrance, and screening from her view the interior of the big, dimly-lighted room.

"It's Thane I'm wanting," she responded, curtly. She raised her voice: "It's you, Thane, that I want."

"The hell you do!" grunted Thane, without stirring a muscle of his mighty limbs.

"Go off," advised old Brandon, not unkindly yet in a tone devoid of sympathy. "Get a move on, Aletta; we can't have women bothering round here; you'll find Margery over at the house."

Before he was aware of her intention she had dived beneath his arm barring the doorway, and had slipped into the store. When he turned, he saw her standing before Thane, who remained immovable. With a word to his comrades Woodward swept them into the open, but not before her full, heavy voice had rung out sharply through the quiet of the room.

"You were with Jo last night?" she rapped out accusingly.

His quick ears detected the questioning note in her sharp tones . . . then Jo had not blabbed.

"You're a fool! . . . s'pose Jo flew to the camp, did she?"

"You weren't at the camp," she panted. "You were back——"

He rose to his great height, towered above her, stretched himself and suppressed a yawn.

"Since you say so . . . s'pose one of your black spies fooled you with that yarn, Aletta." His tones were sarcastic and maddened her. "Anything more I must hear?"

She knew not what to think. Had there been treachery?

From this man she could learn nothing. To pour forth her anger might possibly arouse suspicions in his mind which, in turn, might involve unpleasant discoveries. Nevertheless, to refrain from harsh words she found an impossibility.

"More!" she echoed angrily. "Don't I know to my sorrow the *duivel* you've been to Jo, the traitor you'd like to be to your own country? Shame upon you, Thane Brandon," she called after his retreating form. "Yes, you go off; you don't like my words; yet you shall hear them, and your friends there—the men who have driven our men from us and shut up our women in their accursed warrens—they shall hear when I call you traitor and betrayer—traitor, black as hell!—betrayer, vile as Iscariot!"

He swung himself round in the doorway; the flash from his fiery eyes unnerved her; she felt that fierce glare scorching body and soul.

"Have you done?" his deep growl stole across the silence of the room. She forced herself to look up; old Brandon had left the store; she and Thane were alone together.

She crossed the room to where he stood.

"Answer me, as before our Maker! Answer me, because I am George's wife!" she implored. "Thane, I shall go mad if you don't answer me! Were you with Jo last evening?"

"You damned hell-cat!" he returned, with slow vehemence. "Talk of bein' George's wife, do you? Don't say nothing of your damned pal that you go skippin' over the hill-side of an evening to meet, do you? Traitor! Oh, no; what's a husband to the likes of your precious sort—specially when the husband's being kept safe and tight by Mr. Petrus Bouwer and his pals at the Boer camp? 'Betrayer, vile as 'Scariot!' do you say? Well, if so, you're in good company—in excellent company!" His laugh made her flesh creep . . . her eyes fell beneath the fierce challenge in his. . . . What did he know?

"It isn't true," she panted; "you're just guessing——"

"So are you," he retorted, contemptuously. "Play the game, woman; you let Jo alone. Worry her with your cross-questionings and prying," he went on, fiercely, "and I'll know it, and you'll find I can protect the girl . . . can get you shut up as a spy! There, get along home, and keep your tongue between your teeth if you've got an ounce of sense in your touzled pate."

Woman-like she must needs fling a reply.

"Protect Jo! You're a nice sort of protector!" she grumbled, but in subdued tones, and thus retreated under cover of the last word crossing the yard and passing again through the house into the garden where she found Margery and Babs engaged in gathering a basket of the yellowing peaches from off the heavily-laden boughs.

"Stay for coffee," Margery said, hospitably. "It's just time. Babs, run and tell Lisbeth to make the coffee, and you set the cups and saucers," she added, turning to the child.

"I'll not take sup nor bite under your roof," Aletta declared coldly, when Babs was out of hearing. "False to my man, Thane has called me. *Heer!* Margery, my fingers were itching to tear the eyes out of his head. *Toch! Toch!* If George could but have heard him! But the time will come," she added darkly, "the time will come."

"Don't heed all Thane says," advised her sister-in-law. "You shouldn't have forced yourself upon him; he doesn't stand interference patiently—not nowadays . . . he's worried, as you know."

"And aren't *we* worried?" demanded Aletta, not altogether unreasonably. "Can I sleep in my bed of a night, not knowing whether Jo will ever come back from her wanderings in the dark? And you are as bad as Thane," she added, turning upon Margery. "I asked you a simple question: Was he here last evening? and you put me off . . . you put me off . . . but take care, *schoen-*

sister, take care ; you think yourself secure—you think Aletta a poor harmless creature—quite helpless. What can she do to upset your little plan of marrying the man you have at your feet ? Yet a mere atom of a mouse freed a lion ; and hold your tongue, when by speaking you could relieve my mind, and we shall see what we shall see."

Her tone was so significant that Margery was struck by the latent meaning underlying the threat. She forced herself to speak lightly :

"No doubt we shall see a lot, Aletta, if we live long enough."

"Then you won't answer ? . . . it's war between us ?"

"What Thane doesn't tell you, I can't."

"And what you don't tell your lover, I can," her sister-in-law returned, warningly. "If there is too much water in the mealie-pot it may boil safely for long but in the end it boils over—believe me, Margery, in the end it boils over ; and your mealie-pot's none too secure . . . between a woman's tongue and a man's faith your secret's none too safe . . . I shouldn't, in your place, feel too certain of Woodward's putting the ring on my finger."

She turned and passed down the garden, leaving her sister-in-law coolly and steadily continuing her task of peach-gathering, outwardly unmoved, yet inwardly staggered by a sense as of storm-clouds gathering overhead.

XI

IN one of her dark, dreamy moods Margery gazed down upon the veldt-world stretching before her to the furthest limits of the horizon as she sat overlooking it from the boulder-strewn height of World's View.

Across the broad, majestic face of the illimitable plain, as far as human vision could carry, patches of grey-blue, stunted bush stood out like islands amid the vast, billowy ocean of the yellows and red-browns and greens of the long, rank grasses bending and swaying with the rhythm and ripple of the waves of the sea; casting broken, shadowy, fleeting lights upon the immutable yet ever-changing surface of the boundless veldt-world.

A few paces from where she sat, shading with uplifted hands her eyes from the direct rays of the declining sun, Woodward stood, looking through his field-glasses in a northerly direction.

"I can just distinguish the farm-house," he said presently, coming to her and placing the glasses in her hands. Rising, she stood gazing through them across the distance which separated her from the point at which the Irregulars might possibly come up with the commando.

"Yes," she said, after a pause, "that is the place; quite thirty miles from here, I should say. I have often ridden over there with George."

She handed him back the glasses. He slipped the strap over his shoulders. "We can see nothing of the farm-house except just the glimpse of light playing on the walls and roof."

She resumed her seat on the boulder, drawing her hat over her eyes. Woodward looked down on her, intense compassion for the cruel suspense weighing upon her mind mingling with a sense of conscious helplessness at the task of lightening her dark mood, stamped on his eager, resolute face.

"Margery," his voice broke passionately upon the stillness of the wide world in which they found themselves alone together, "it is cruel both to yourself and to me to eat your heart out, suffering in silence! I am yours, dearest—then let me share your suffering."

"Suffering is the bread life offers to humanity," she answered, speaking in an unemotional tone.

There fell upon the man a more insistent sense of his utter helplessness to help this woman to whom his soul was knit with a great longing of desire for closest union and heart-to-heart fellowship, mingled with a sense of perplexity as to his real ability to understand her. Every fibre of his being was set throbbing to the tune of his overmastering love for her; his heaven lay in the tender depths of those deep-set eyes; he felt that she loved him with all the strength of her passionate heart and soul; that her affection for him was a vital and recognized part of her strongly-moulded self, of her deep, intense individuality; that they were pledged to one another—co-mates for all future time. Yet still he stood there before her, helpless and puzzled; troubled by the old sense of mystery that clung to her, by the old intuition of that dark mask which draped her features, and cloaked her soul and shrouded her real self. Into the heart of the real woman he strove to penetrate, but again the old formidable barrier erected itself—tangible, yet invisible—separating and hiding the heart and mind of the woman from the intrusions of the man.

That she suffered was but inevitable and natural, since she stood in the terrible position of only sister to two brothers ranged on different sides of the forces about to meet in a sharp and deadly conflict. Strange, it would

have been, had she not under these circumstances suffered intensely from the cruel agony of suspense she was called upon to endure. But while making all allowance for this natural condition of body and mind, Woodward intuitively realized that there was some other cause—some more intimate personal reason—for her present suffering; for the restless, despondent mood which had pressed upon her throughout the day.

The mood, indeed, was nothing new to her, nor was the sense of perplexity foreign to his reflections in regard to her. He was never with her but he was haunted by that earliest sense of something that fascinated, yet eluded; that baulked, yet drew him. He would get just so far, and then remain unsatisfied. Often, too, as he had watched her coming and going on her daily round of housekeeping duties—or plying needle and thread in the quiet of the evening—he had found her restless and uneasy; often, for no reason as it seemed to him, swayed unnaturally by a mood he could neither enter into nor fathom. With a passionate joy, as it had seemed to Woodward, she had at last surrendered herself to him and to his love for her, clutching, as at some unutterable bliss, at this gift life held out to her—the gift of the love and devotion of his sober, quiet, somewhat reserved manhood; welcoming it with a force and intensity that shook her proud, self-contained nature to its inmost depths.

In those days of her earliest confession of their mutual love and of her passionate acceptance of that love, she had appeared to him as one who, in the past, had been crushed by a vital blow under which she had sunk into apathy, and now, in the oncoming of mental convalescence, was timidly lifting up eyes responsive to the beckonings of hope toward a brightening future. So he, too, had been led to hope and believe that her cure of that fell life-sickness which had overtaken her on the threshold of her dawning womanhood had been radical and complete. Yet now again he looked down upon her darkening brow, touched by despair—enigmatic and brooding—and as

he saw her thus, his doubt as to her perfect healing, his perplexity as to his divining of the real woman within her returned in full force.

His silence arrested the flow of her gloomy thoughts, drew her to his grave absorption, and with a sudden heart-beat she shook from her mind the black misgivings which had troubled her since Aletta's dark threat of the previous afternoon. For the last time she told herself vehemently she never would speak—would never let go her secret; let come what may, her lips should remain sealed. It was her fiery retort to the faint whisperings of a conscience that was beginning to make itself heard.

She would not speak; yet neither would she relinquish Woodward. He had grown too dear to her to risk the chance of losing him through a confession as to her real position—her past history. She would hold him to her; yet she would hold her secret, guarding Babs' interests.

Into her brooding eyes sprang a fierceness of resolve that instantly changed them to a jewel-like brightness; her dark, formidable brows unbent; her face grew alive, eager, passionate, as she leaned sideways, stretching out a hand and looking up at Woodward with conscious tenderness. At the action, the glance, his doubts dispersed, his perplexity vanished; he was at her side, kneeling before her; his arm around her bent shoulders, the fragrance of her soft, dark hair stealing over his senses, intoxicating him.

"*Hold me from myself,*" she breathed, in a low intensity that he felt to be real. "Phil, there often will be times when I'll behave to you like the veriest wretch—when you'll wish that you'd never had anything to do with me . . ."

"I'll never wish that, dearest," he returned, in the strong, comforting tones that brought to her aching, tempest-tossed heart such a sense of rest and safety. "I ask nothing more of life so that you and I spend the years together. Ours is a great love, isn't it, Margery? Do you feel yours for me great enough to forgive my

blundering attempts to understand you—my clumsy efforts to help you?”

The flame in her eyes startled him; her arms were around him, her face upturned to his.

“Forgive me, Phil . . . I’ve been a perfect brute to you all day! . . . forgive me . . . I’m worried—awfully worried—I’ve been mad, hardly knowing what I said or did . . . *George!* . . . *Thane!* . . . My God! I feel I shall go off my head if they’re not soon back. But, oh, Phil!”—she turned her burning eyes on his—“I need not have been such a *beast* to you, dearest. You have been so patient with me—so good, and tender, and dear! . . . Oh, Phil, I couldn’t lose your love now—I couldn’t lose it and bear my miserable life—the old, miserable, monotonous life I used to live before you came into it!”

She had drawn him down to her seat upon the low, flat boulder and crept close within his arms. The feel of his near presence heartened and comforted her, and she tried to believe that all would yet be well as his lips gently touched her hair.

“Phil, it’s absurd of you to suggest that I have anything to forgive,” she said, more brightly; “I could almost wish it were so—that you had done me some cruel wrong that I might show you mine isn’t a poor, feeble, little love frightened by shadows—or even by sins. Dearest, don’t you know—don’t you feel in your heart and soul—that all my hope of happiness in life is bound up in your love for me? And I have been so unkind, so ungracious, so heartless! Can you forgive me, Phil? Can you love me just as well as you did yesterday?” she asked humbly, putting her hand to his face.

“Better,” he returned, emphatically. “Better, I think, Margery, because of the suffering you’ve had to bear. My love will forgive everything you may choose to be or do; you are part of myself and from henceforth what gladdens you, gladdens me; what hurts you, hurts me. Don’t be afraid, sweetheart”—his voice grew serious and

significant ; " don't be afraid that I shall ever be anything but sorry for your dark moods ; they grieve me because I see you suffering, but they make no difference to my love for you ; that is a part of myself ; that never can change or die."

" Would nothing make it change ? " she asked, slowly.

" Nothing—except the knowledge that you had been deceiving me—playing with me . . . for that would mean you had no love for me."

" Then you would cease to love me ? "

" Then I should try to forget you. I don't say I should be successful"—his arm tightened round her, and his eyes drew hers with the force of their strong magnetism.

Again there rushed over her the desire to tell him all, to confess the past ; but the image of the red-lipped child, so dear to her, rose before her, sealing her lips.

Then Woodward was speaking :

" I have felt, Margery—wrongly it may be—that there is a barrier between us—dividing us ; that it is this barrier which is keeping me from entering into your moods in the only way that would be of real help to you in bearing them . . . don't think I want to pry into old sores," he added hastily, as beneath the drawn brows he noted her paling face ; " I want only to help you, darling ; if you are in trouble—some trouble very real and heavy to you, and of which I know nothing—speak and let me share it ; Margery, don't shut me out of your heart, out of your cares ; if you love me you won't do that ; if you love me you'll let me share this secret trouble, or sorrow, or worry, whatever it may be ; if you love me, Margery."

His quiet, deep voice sounded forcefully on the calm stillness around, imploring her to confession, entreating of her a confidence his by right—a confidence, she felt, which if after these words she still withheld, in the day when he learned her secret he must of necessity question the sincerity of her love.

But that day might never dawn ; Aletta's threat not-

withstanding, she declined to entertain the possibility of Woodward ever learning her dark secret. After all, Aletta's words were haphazard, the result of years of deeply-ingrained suspicion. That suspicion had fastened upon Babs' birth was but natural; that their neighbours held views upon the question as to the child's parentage Margery was well aware. But to put such suspicions openly into words, and to address those words to a friend of the Brandon family, was quite another matter; and that her sister-in-law would actually do so she felt to be a very remote contingency, a quite impossible eventuality. In any case she would see to it that Aletta got no opportunity for conversation with Woodward.

She must brave the matter out; her eyes searching his down-bent face, she answered:

"Dearest, all life has held sorrow for me since I grew up and lost my mother; and it has been hidden . . . oh, yes; women bear their troubles in that quiet, dull, resigned sort of fashion, you know, Phil; even the dearest of brothers can't always understand. I've my dark moods—black enough life looks to me then, too—but it's not *one* sorrow that causes them; it's sorrow, worry, trouble, piled on sorrow, worry, trouble—you understand?"

She raised herself, bringing her face on a level with his.

The serious, iron-grey eyes of the man looked steadfastly, straightly, inquiringly into the jewel-bright, greenish-grey eyes of the woman, now wide and intent as she returned the scrutiny. Only she feared lest the loud throbbing of her pulses should betray her. She was inwardly beaten down by the despair of the thought that she who loved this man—who desired him, worshipped him, lived but for him—was, nevertheless, *lying* to him; deceiving him.

"Then I was mistaken?" he said, in a puzzled way, "I have been on a wrong track all the while? There is

nothing worrying you—not one particular worry, I mean, apart, of course, from your anxiety about your brothers ? ”

“ There is nothing, dear Phil ; ” she forced her tones to the old, tender sincerity, “ nothing but all the old sores aching together because my mind is so racked with anxiety over our boys.”

The love which had come to him somewhat late in life had awakened in Woodward’s slow-moving and reserved yet deeply-sensitive nature a forceful capacity, an insistent demand for its fulfilment in his union with the woman now grown so dear to him, so necessary to his future happiness or content. And now, as she spoke, sweeping away the last barrier that had seemed to stand between the perfect union of their souls, the perfect marriage of their minds and persons, his love for Margery Brandon assumed its highest proportions, awoke tenfold in power and intensity, turning to fire in his veins. As his burning kisses were pressed upon her lips and eyes and hair, as she felt herself held closely within his embrace, Margery, a smile in her eyes, despair in her heart, yet thanked herself for the courage with which she had lied to him.

“ Nothing can take away these moments . . . nothing can make them as though they never had been . . . as though I never had lived and *felt*—down to the very heart of life itself—while his arms were around me,” she told herself in a burst of fierce triumph.

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But that was while they lingered on the mountain-top—the glory of the evening shadows around them, the last painted streak from the lingering radiance of the setting sun falling upon the coppery threads in Margery’s dark hair, lighting the jewel-gleam of her wild, alluring eyes.

Now they were threading the shadowy mazes of the bush-path—where the trees grew close overhead and where the surrounding thicket hid the lair of wild life ; they were treading the path Thane had named her Calvary ; she thought of it now as she moved down the rugged, narrow

track—over the charred stumps, and moss-grown stones, and tangle of twisted roots—pressing to Woodward's side.

His arm around her, she talked in her low, musical, persuasive tones, or listened with joy fiercely beating at the door of her heart as he discussed plans for their early marriage. He must go back to Australia, just for a time—to sell off his stock and farms . . . but, of course, she must go with him . . . as soon as ever Peace came. . . . Then they would return . . . his love for her was binding him for life to this strange, unfamiliar land. Henceforth the Transvaal would be his home . . . they would make a nest for themselves close to the dear old home.

And Babs?—oh, yes, Babs was to be their chick—they would start with a chick to hand . . . a promise of their own little ones to come . . . And at this they must needs stop and lose themselves in one another's arms . . .

"Phil, whatever sorrows life has brought me—this atones," Margery said with intensity when again they had started on their homeward way.

"You have never before been in love?" he asked suddenly; and she had her reply ready:

"Not like this—the highest——"

"And you are happy, Margery? Tell me, dearest; does my love make you quite happy? . . . You seem to have suffered so much that I want you to be happy, darling."

"So I am, dear; madly happy—when I don't stop to think——" her voice dropped and slid into silence.

"—Of the past, do you mean?" he asked, tenderly.

"Of *life*," she said, soberly. "Nobody who feels can be happy if they think of life. How is it possible? When one stops to think one cannot but remember, not only one's individual suffering, but that awful breath of human misery always beating around us—beating steadily all the world over to the tune of life. It's such a horrible, out-

standing fact that unless one makes up one's mind to ignore it and push it aside altogether one finds happiness impossible."

"Love makes happiness possible," he insisted, masterfully.

"Yes, dear," she said aloud; and then again: "Yes, Phil; and I am happy; I don't mean to think all my past unhappy thoughts about life, and trouble, and the miseries of humanity; I mean to think only of you, dearest . . . and to be happy."

Again Woodward felt something of the strange temperament of the woman by his side; again he penetrated her reserve, glanced for a moment below the surface of her habitual coldness, and indifference and reserve, and caught a glimpse of the warmth and fullness of her silently-brooding heart—of the depth and intensity of that rarely-sympathetic nature. Her eyes upraised to his moved him strangely with their pleading, passionate gaze; his arm drew her nearer as he looked down upon her—half perplexed, half curious, wholly loving.

XII

THE writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes, whether the intensely-bored, intensely-human monarch of an intensely-materialistic people, or—as modern critics now contend—quite another person, has left to the world many sentiments, admirable or otherwise, which the social conditions of our modern life appear still to accept and embrace as truths peculiarly fitted to the requirements of the bulk of humanity all the world over. After having tried unsuccessfully every recipe for happiness, the writer gives up life as hopeless and unsatisfactory. He says, therefore, in effect: Have a good time, enjoy your youth, drink the cup of pleasure to the brim; nevertheless, all ends in vanity, nothingness; all leads to disillusion, weariness, discontent. Then he sums up with the conviction that, taking life all round, the best that may be made of it is obtained by shunning the material pleasures it offers us and, instead of relying upon these for happiness, by seeking it in another fashion: namely, by fearing the Creator and keeping His commandments.

Nowadays we still demand that priceless boon of a recipe for happiness. In this essentially materialistic age wealth to the majority spells happiness. This seems to be the keynote of most people's anxiety to make money. We labour and strive to grow rich quickly in order that we may have a good time. 'Let us make haste to be rich; life is short; the period for enjoying its pleasures extremely limited; decrepitude is ahead when desire will fail; let us enjoy our lives and the pleasures of life

before old age comes on and robs us of desire'—in such sentiments appears summed up our present-day creed.

We lie and scheme, and cheat and rob, in our frantic desire for the gold that is to bring happiness into our lives. We harden our hearts and blind our eyes and cramp our souls and crush the noblest instincts of our natures groping with down-bent bodies and not over-clean-hands at the hard task of money-grubbing. The evils resultant upon this world-wide perversion of to-day cry aloud from the dens of the sweated worker, from the reeking slums of our great cities, from the hovels of the under world of beast-men, from the painted cheek of the prostituted womanhood and girlhood walking our streets. Yet still the grim struggle goes on, the incessant battle continues to be waged; for ever before the eyes of the money-grubber lurks that will-o'-the-wisp of happiness.

To Margery Brandon, as she felt the irresistible call of a powerful human attraction, and realized clearly that for herself happiness and content lay alone in the enjoyment of the material and human bond of mate-ship with Woodward, certain of the above sentiments propounded by the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes appeared as profound truths. She grasped to secure happiness while yet the power to enjoy it remained to her; she deceived the man she loved in order to secure it while yet the desire for it was upon her; trouble might possibly come of it; vanity, disillusionment, loss, might be the end of the matter; nevertheless, she stood hardened in her intention to grasp at this chance of happiness life had opened out to her. She had not sought after it; for long she had stoutly rejected it; it had come to her unsought, amid the appointed duties and ordinary pursuits of the monotonous quiet of her home-life. It had stood before her for many months past—tempting, inciting, beckoning—and she had finally reached out her hands to grasp the coveted treasure. For Nature had spoken in her plain, unmistakable language; Nature had decreed that this man was her mate; that she and Philip Woodward were each the

other's complement, and that alone each was incomplete. They both had felt this strong, irresistible call of Nature, and their every sense had responded to the call. She loved this strong, true mate whose love for her had broken the power of her indomitable will and had captured the stronghold of the depths of her slumbering emotions; loved him with Nature's own peculiar gift to the sons and daughters nearest to her mighty heart—with passion that stirred within her in all its bigness and lure of strength, with its hot breath and primitive, brute force. Not to have lied to Woodward in order to have kept the bond between them unbroken would have been a crime, Margery told herself. To have revealed her secret would equally have been criminal. To live up to the high standard of life at which one aims is not always possible, she reflected, and failure in such a case must be set down to the account of some unavoidable tangle in the scheme of our lives.

As one by one the stars slipped into the sky overhead, and the silence of night fell around them, they emerged from the bush-path, turned the bend, and came into line with the twinkling lights of the Top Farm homestead.

A voice, full and heavy, from over the low, green thickness of the sprouting kaffir-boem hedge sent Margery suddenly, with a quick start, further from Woodward's side.

"So you two have been up the hill to look on at your devil's work?" Aletta asked, hoarsely.

"Come on," commanded Margery in a low, short underbreath, "don't let us stop to reason with her; she'll only insult us."

"You're afraid!" Aletta called aloud, tauntingly; mad with fury—since the events of the evening had confirmed her in her suspicions of Johanna's treachery to her people—she had lost all control of herself, and now saw only in this opportunity presenting itself before her a fitting chance to avenge the black treachery of which they had been the accomplices upon some member of the Brandon family. "You're running away," she cried in her

rage and fury, "because you dare not let your lover hear my words."

Woodward fell back, his form stiffening; Marjory moved slowly onward, too proud to repeat her request.

"—You dare not tell him the truth about the child . . . I defy you to tell him . . . shame, then, Margery——"

She started perceptibly as Woodward's tall figure, stumbling over the loose stones, was visible returning through the dim light.

"You're a woman!" he said in a low, savage voice that Aletta found far from reassuring; she looked round, but no one was in sight; then she heard his voice sounding again, low and furious: "If you were not, I should know how to punish your vile words! As it is, your husband shall know to what depths your malice has dragged you down. What has his sister ever done to you—but tried to help you along? Why should you utter such vile insinuations against her?"

He waited; but Aletta, afraid already of the consequences of her hastily-spoken and malicious accusation, remained silent; and Woodward turned and passed down the hill.

XIII

IT was on the rustic foot-bridge that he found Margery awaiting his coming.

"Forgive me; I had to give her a bit of my mind; I owed it to you, dearest, to do that much," he said cheerfully.

Aletta's base insinuations had stirred him to a fury of white heat, but they had raised no shadow of doubt or of ugly suspicion in his mind.

It was not until he had taken Margery in his arms and drawn her to his breast—so that despite the dim light of the evening he saw clearly the look on her face, the expression in her eyes—that doubt first crept into Philip Woodward's heart and soul—perplexing, terrifying, maddening him.

The kiss he had stooped to press upon her lips remained arrested as that look of doubt and dread sprang to birth in his keen, dark eyes and stole slowly over his bewildered face.

She struggled to her feet.

"Let us go home," she said, huskily.

Half-way up the orchard-path, under the heavily-laden fruit-trees upon which the golden and crimson balls swung pendulous and fragrant, he laid a light touch on her arm.

His insupportable burden of doubt voiced itself heavily.

"What does it mean, Margery? . . . Is there anything in what she said?"

She stood before him—silent, inexplicable—with darkened brows and veiled eyes.

"You ask me that?" she demanded, after a pause, a note of sarcasm pervading the low tones.

Her question, her attitude, maddened him. He was like a man blindfolded, in some pestilential dungeon, fighting his way against the vague, intangible blackness that swarmed about him on all sides; seeking the opening, the light that would bring liberty and salvation.

"You must answer me," he said, with a quick incisiveness in his tone new to her experience. "Margery, I ask you to answer my question."

Now she knew her fate . . . it had stolen upon her even as the sound of her sister-in-law's full, heavy voice had stolen upon her from over George's prized kaffir-boem hedge in the silence of the star-lit evening . . . Her face changed with the repetition of Woodward's question and he saw it draped in its old mask—expressionless, enigmatic—with the dull, partly-veiled eyes looking out of its white weariness.

"You will answer me, dearest?" he pleaded.

But, with a not ungentle movement, she put him from her.

"I shall not answer you . . . you had no right to ask the question . . . since you *have* done so—since, so it seems, you doubt—you have allowed yourself to doubt—that takes away your right to question me," she said, firmly.

"You mean—because I have asked if there was anything in those base words thrown at you—that my right to you is at end?" he asked, in slow anger.

"That is what I mean," she explained simply; "your question about Aletta's vile insinuations of me has shown that your love is not what you thought it—is not what I thought it; that it has been tried in the balance of those words—and found wanting."

The truth came home to him then——*she was the mother of the child—of little Babs!* How dense he had

been through it all ! She had lied to him on the mountain-top ; had deceived and misled him ; had made a sport of him !

By the hardening of his eyes she perceived that the truth was known to him—that she had lost him—that his great love for her had fallen into dust and ashes ; leaving only contempt, scorn, loathing of her in that heart upon which she had thought to lean for all future happiness.

She had lost him, but the secret was hers. He might guess, he might feel convinced that this thing was really so ; but without her confession he never could know, never could be certain. And sooner would she tear her tongue from between her teeth than confess the misfortune that had overtaken her youth, the shame that had fallen upon her nameless, innocent child.

“ Found wanting ! ” she had said ; “ his love for her had been tried and found wanting ! ” Scarcely realizing what had happened, with the low, accusing, musical ring of those words sounding in his ears—beating upon his brain—Woodward, with uncertain tread following the echo of those light, hurrying footsteps, passed along through orchard and garden.

XIV

IT was late, and the post-house lay wrapped in darkness save where a gleam of light spoke of the dim oil-lamp burning in the bar. Wearied with a three-hour tramp, Woodward pushed open the door and found Sinclair, the barman, hushing two thirsty troopers.

"For the love of heaven! you chaps, keep your tongues between your teeth! God alone knows how the old man and Miss Margery 'ud bear hearing of this."

"What is it?" asked Woodward, in surprise.

Sinclair put his finger to his lips; the troopers, who recognized in Woodward an officer of the Irregular contingent, saluted.

"Seems there's been a bit of a scrap, sir, so we hear," said one man, in lowered tones.

"When? Where?" asked Woodward, sharply.

"Venter's Hoek way . . . about daybreak, so we hear."

"Mister Thane'll be bound to have been in it," said Sinclair, when the troopers had noiselessly departed, "And Mister George? Lord! Lord! it makes my blood creep to think on 'em two coming together face to face in a fight."

"Hush!" said Woodward apprehensively, fearing every moment to see Margery's white face looking in upon them . . . She must be spared the news this night . . . she must be left to sleep in peace. . . . God alone knew when peaceful sleep would again come to her.

The oil-lamp extinguished, the front doors bolted and barred, Sinclair went off to his bed leaving Woodward a prey to bitter, unbearable reflections as he paced up and

down, to and fro, the length of the house-front—stopping now and again to glance at the window of the room which held the woman he loved.

“What a fool!—what a damnable, unmitigated fool he had been to have put that cruel, coarse, humiliating question to her?” What would he not give never to have put it? In the terrible news to hand of that morning’s encounter between the rival forces; in the overpowering dread of what that encounter might mean to her—to her peace of mind—to her very existence—Woodward had swept from his remembrance all thoughts of her deception toward himself, all those cruel imaginings which the very thought of Babs had, during the agony of the past burdened hours, conjured up for him. He was conscious only of the outstanding fact that sorrow’s dread touch might be about to fall upon Margery; that news of disaster to her brothers might be about to descend upon her; and that he had fallen from her love, had fallen from her side, and had lost the right to share her sorrow and to help her through the dark hour of grief and suffering and bitter, unspeakable sorrow which might even now be at hand, waiting upon the threshold of her home.

The night-breezes—warm and languorous—sighed around him, typifying the restless sighing of his heart; the stars, jewel-bright, hung silently overhead; the moon, declining westward in the wide, cloudless heavens, threw more vividly the sombre shadow of World’s View—clear-cut and ominous—across the portals of The Outspan.

BOOK FOUR

I

THE men of van der Merwe's commando, during the several months they had been banded together, had indulged in a species of guerilla warfare peculiarly suited to their tastes. They had retreated before the advance of the enemy, it is true, but in such a masterly fashion that while keeping themselves well out of sight and under excellent cover they had harassed the Irregulars, sniping at them by day and by night; thinning their numbers by stray pot-shots delivered from krantz and spruit and low, dense bush. So far, their campaign had been a picnic, and it was not until the latest disquieting reports from their runners of the unusual stir among the forces of the enemy caused them to leave their safe retreat—in full numbers and somewhat earlier than had been originally planned by their leaders, in their endeavour to carry out the ambush upon which they were bent—that this picnic was suddenly turned to grim battle.

For now in an instant, at the first glimmer of dawn, the enemy with whom they did not expect to come in touch for the next twenty-four hours was upon them. While they woke and yawned, and grasped for their arms, grim war was upon them with the whizz of bullet, the screams of pain, the cries of vengeance, the hissing of shot, the fearful riving and rending of body and limb, the horrible presence of carnage and death strewn over the veldt-world, polluting the air, where but ten minutes since the

freshness and fragrance of the awakening day alone had reigned.

Their position was hopeless from the first. Abandoning their exposed front, the burghers dashed round a low *kopje* immediately to their rear, taking cover in a gully amid a patch of scrub where their horses stood tethered.

"It is only a matter of time to force them out from it," said the commanding officer to Thane, who rode by his side. "Did you see anything of your brother?" he asked, lowering his tones.

"Think I'd be sitting here if I had?" Thane retorted excitedly. "No, sir, I'd be off full lick, fleeing before the foe," he added, with a short laugh, "if I *had* seen him. But I looked—though I knew he couldn't be here."

"That's well," said the other; "you keep your eyes open, my boy, and clear out if you spot him . . . we'll understand."

"He's not with them . . . you see, Brouwer's news to his wife was that George had been asking for leave for months past, and determined to take it if they did not grant it. So I feel sure he'll have taken it now, since he'll have had this opportunity now he's been left with the transport a day behind the commando."

"The Boers, of course, expected those left behind to come up with them here before tackling us?" asked the Australian.

"Of course; you see, they weren't expecting us for another twenty-four hours, otherwise van der Merwe would never have waited behind; they'd not have left any of their men behind; the wagons and the niggers are the only things they'd have left in camp, had they guessed of the little surprise awaiting them here this morning."

"Aye; we've got 'em bushed properly now."

"They hate fighting before breakfast," laughed Thane. A strange sense of exhilaration had swept over his whole being, replacing his late tempestuous and sullen mood. He could have laughed aloud for the pure and simple joy

of finding himself alive and facing the delight of battle. George had gone home, and there he should find him safely on his return. Meanwhile the fact that a tough hand-to-hand fight with the Boers was at hand did not cause him any discomposure; though that the burghers would eventually emerge and close with them in a desperate fight for their lives he recognized as a certainty. The Northern Transvaalers had been taught by incidents—terrible, yet inevitable—of the uncompromising temper of the opposing force—the great army of the Irregulars—who, irritated to frenzy by acts of treachery upon their comrades, had here, as elsewhere, given ample proof of the swift and sure vengeance they were determined to wreak upon any crooked dealings practised by their opponents on the battle-field. Even now the men of the contingent might be heard shouting to each other to remember their trapped and murdered comrades, and to pay no heed to any signs of surrender. “Don’t be bamboozled by any damned white rag! . . . No quarter, chaps . . . give ’em beans and no quarter!” they called savagely one to another across the stillness of the dewy morning—their pulses afire, their faces aflame, ready to give and to take death-dealing blows. Men in the lust of battle are more ferocious than wild beasts, and when to the lust of battle is linked the wild call of vengeance upon murdered countrymen and comrades, to the senseless fury of pure savage animalism lusting after blood and life there is added the conscious reasoning of devils incarnate, bent on diabolical deeds. In Thane’s heart there was no thought of vengeance; it was the joy of battle alone—the wish to hurl his mighty, uncurbed passions against someone or something equally mighty, equally uncurbed—which set his pulses leaping within his big body. The weight and anxiety of the past months that had pressed so heavily upon his mind, the bitterness and sullen ferocity and furious hatred—all were gone. He stood squarely, face to face with an indomitable foe, “spoiling”—as he himself put it to his friends, with the

faint, good-humoured smile so long absent from his handsome face once again softening its hardness—"spoiling for a fight."

"Well, we'll get it hot enough, don't you fear?" laughed the commanding officer. "Look out there, you fellows . . . look slippery. . . ." He shouted his orders to his officers in cheerful, sharp fashion. "Keep the men under cover and let them blaze on the beggars as they pop out."

The Boer leaders were at the same moment heartening up their cowed followers by alternate threats and entreaties, and rough, persuasive reasonings mingled with cant phrases and volleys of oaths and curses.

"Get together! Get together!" the old *commandant* bellowed in stentorian tones. "We'll outwit them yet—the godless, white-livered curs; in the might of the Lord we'll send them whimpering back to the hell from whence they have been drawn to do their devil's work on our land. You sergeants there, every man by his horse; get your men in order; then mount, and as soon as the order is given, use your *sjamboks* if they don't take it at the trot . . . What's that? Who's for sneaking behind? We don't leave a man with our wounded. What would be the sense of that, seeing these are the sort of devils that shoot them?"

There was some murmuring at this, but the *commandant* waved aside the voices of the dissentients and thundered on: "As we round that *kopje*—at top-speed, men—*scheit! scheit!* . . . Every man bring down his buck with every shot he fires, or Oom Koos will want to know the reason why. Then, before they can wink away your powder from their eyes—those who are left to wink or blink—ride, men, *ride! ride!*—ride as though Satan himself were on your heels! and we'll get through them well enough, and live to thank the Lord for His merciful deliverance of us from the battle."

But many among old Koos' followers were inclined to hold back from this bold move. "It's death to us," they

grumbled. "We didn't come out to join your commando, leaving our farms and our wives and our children unprotected, simply in order to be potted like rabbits feeding in the grass before sun-up. Let us wave a white flag! Here's a shirt handy . . . here's another . . . let us make it quite plain lest they should pretend not to have seen."

The weakness of the Boer forces lay in their sturdy rebellion against orders which did not meet with their approval, in their resistance to the wishes of their leaders when these did not coincide with their own idea of the fitness of things. These independent burghers, gathered together from their farmsteads on the distant outlying districts of the Transvaal, refused on the battle-field to acknowledge any one superior, autocratic authority, when such appeared to them as likely to lead to certain disaster. Fools and idealists might glory in forlorn hopes and wild, heroic charges; they were practical men, holding life as a valuable gift which they prized and under no conditions would recklessly endanger. There were their wives and little ones to be remembered, far off in their isolated homes of the back-veldt, exposed to the dangers that lurked around from their twin enemies—the white invader and the black marauder. They stiffened their sinews and hardened their hearts to resist this absurdity of a charge. In vain their leaders grew purple with rage, as they coaxed, entreated, threatened.

van der Merwe came to the rescue.

"My brethren, be guided by us in this matter. If we ride hard and shoot straight—every man by his brother's shoulder—the Almighty will not desert us in this charge, but will cause to go astray the bullets of our godless enemies; and we shall break through them as certainly as that the day breaks through the night."

"*Nooit! Nooit!* We'll surrender! It is surely the will of the Lord that we surrender and save our lives, since there are our women-folk and children left on the farms," burst out the discontented burghers.

"And be shot when you surrender!" shouted Prinsloo. "Cowards! have you then forgotten your comrades—shot down after they had surrendered? Have you no heads to remember their fate and the fate of the wounded—shot all alike by this same man of blood who is standing there, just round the *kopje*, waiting for us to come out? White flag or no white flag, believe me, men, he'll shoot us down without mercy so soon as we show ourselves!"

"Not he! . . . the flag will protect us," shouted several voices in reply. One burly burgher climbed upon an ant-heap and waved an arm for attention. "You listen to me, comrades," he cried, gruffly, "he shot that lot—no more than some half-dozen men—because they had let themselves *be found out* when they played that trick on his brother-officer. Has our commando been guilty of such conduct? No, my brothers, we are guiltless—so far as he knows—therefore it stands to reason the man will respect our white flag, and simply make prisoners of us till peace comes."

"And treat us as well as these English always do," said a sandy-haired sergeant with pale-blue eyes. He was busily getting his men into order, and gave George Brandon, who was one of them, a slight shove to get into position.

"What's that, Bouwer?" thundered Prinsloo. "You ought to be encouraging your men instead of talking foolishness."

"It's not foolishness," answered back a chorus of voices. "The man has no grudge against us as he had against that lot. Besides, we have heard tell that the British Commander-in-Chief has sent strict warning that if any more prisoners are shot he'll have the officers shot in return."

A jeer of laughter at this inexplicable attitude on the part of the Commander-in-Chief, at this extreme sensibility over the natural horrors which must necessarily attend guerilla warfare in a wild and far-reaching expanse of un-get-at-able country, broke from the lips of the more

reckless among the Boers. Their horses by their sides, their rifles in their hands, their stomachs no longer empty—for during the above discussion their leaders had seen to it that they had partaken of the breakfast of dough-cakes and *biltong* carried by each man ready to hand in his light saddle-bag—fed and heartened, the Boers felt more disposed for battle; and their objections finally died a natural death after they had been further stimulated and animated and brought to the requisite pitch of courage by the *soupie* of *dop* measured out in small tin pannikins, and served to each man in turn. To each Boer it was as the Sacramental Cup, imparting to each individual who drank of it a sure and certain virtue which should render his person immune to the bullets of the enemy.

II

“**D**RINK, man,” said Bouwer in a friendly tone to George. “Drink; and for the sake of your wife and sister fight to-day, if you never before fought in your life.”

George glanced at him steadily, but made no reply. Since he was, by some miscarriage of plans, in the midst of this oncoming conflict, there remained nothing for it but to ride through the carnage that awaited them. The Boers would not leave him behind. He must go forward with the commando. For the sake of those dear to him, those loved ones awaiting in a cruel, long-drawn-out suspense his return to the old home, he told himself, he must ride for his life through the ranks of friend and foe. This he would do. But he would not fire a shot. Upon that he was still firmly resolved.

“I run the same risk as you, man,” Bouwer argued angrily, as though the consciousness of having forced upon his friend his present untenable position weighed upon his mind. “If you don’t fire and then get hit—*from behind*—why, don’t blame me, that’s all . . . I’ve warned you what to expect if you sit tight and don’t use the *roer*.”

As he dropped his voice to a low whine, van der Merwe was heard bestowing a brief but hearty benediction on the commando. “Amen! Amen!” came the low refrain, swelling from a chorus of gruff voices and drowned by the sharply shouted “Forward! Forward!” thundering above all else; by the loud crack of the *sjamboks* falling upon the flanks of the leaping horses. With a thud of

descending hoofs, with a rush of oaths and imprecations, the Boers went dashing around the *kopje*, and the sharp crack of the rifles, the "ping, ping," of the returning shots, broke like a succession of thunderclaps on the cloudless beauty of the calm summer morning.

The sun, rising in its glory, blinked in the eyes of the enemy, baulking their return shot. A second volley saluted them, and a man at Thane's side fell from his wildly-leaping horse as it bounded forward. In a flash, Thane, still bubbling over with the fierce joy of battle, had dug spurs lightly against Buller's side, and when, with one huge stride, he was brought to the point where the fallen man lay, had seized him in a vice-like grip and carried him beyond the danger zone. As he stooped, leaning over the prancing Buller, and then raised himself, leaning back fearlessly erect—a broad, massive figure in blue-and-white striped shirt, with bare, bronzed arms on which the muscles showed taut and rope-like—his bigness and daring marked him out as an easy target for the enemy. The Boers saw him; to many of them he was personally known, a Transvaaler like themselves, though now, by reason of the war, turned to be their enemy. A volley of shots pursued him. A cry broke from out their ranks, and while it yet rang out—unheard by reason of the thunderclap of the resounding shots—Thane disappeared from sight.

"You knock up my arm a second time and I'll blow your brains to pieces!" Bouwer exclaimed threateningly to George, furious at his diverted aim. Who could tell whether the bullet sped by his aim would not have found its billet in the fiery heart of his disdainful adversary, a charmed life though he appeared to bear?

"Would you have me sit by while you shoot down my brother?" George retorted, fiercely; and Bouwer, awed by the sound of the voice and the terrible look in those deep-set, stern blue eyes, fell to a low remonstrance.

"Shoot, man, shoot! or you'll get shot from behind!"

But the heir of the Brandons remained insensible to his

words, staggered beneath the blow which had fallen upon him. His worst fears were verified since he had caught sight of that tall, massive figure sitting fearlessly astride the leaping Buller, calmly, with a grip of his bared right arm, dragging from out a tangle of scrub, from beneath a hail of bullets, a fallen comrade. Even while a thrill of pride and satisfaction at his brother's daring and courage stirred his generous, loving heart, the awful knowledge that he and Thane had come face to face in the conflict caused his heart to fail and his pulses to beat low and faint. In this moment the love he bore his brother robbed him of the natural desire of life implanted so imperishably within a man's breast. After such an encounter, what possible future could he and Thane hope to pass together? Silently he petitioned that death might find him out if but Thane could be spared the knowledge of his presence among the commando.

But when Thane rejoined his comrades, they were charging wildly down the slope, leaping upon the ranks of their opponents. In another moment the combatants were inextricably blended in a struggling mass of horses and riders, foe breathing into the very face of foe. Men fell with faces blackened with powder; they fought hand to hand, using now the revolver, now the butt-end of the Martini. Thane's hand was on Bouwer's throat, gripping it mightily as he swung the half-strangled Boer to and fro. Then with a laugh he tossed him back among his comrades, while his loud, cheerful "Live, Petrus! I'll spare you for the sake of old days," rang out through the clamour of the combat. Then as his keen, roving eyes darted over the ranks of the enemy, they sought out and dwelt upon one of their number sitting his horse in a strangely familiar fashion—his right hand holding his rifle carelessly, his knees pressed against the heaving sides of the big bay, urging him forward through the mass of struggling humanity within which man and horse were tightly wedged, while with his free hand he lightly shook the bridle-reins as though encouraging the frightened

animal to further effort. Thane looked hard, his brow darkening, his face paling, as a realization of the truth slowly forced itself upon his stunned consciousness and then, as in a lightning flash, was revealed to him. *It was George sitting there, scarcely a couple of yards ahead of him, trying to get himself and Roona through the mêlée!* Thane saw him clearly for a moment . . . then a mist blurred everything before his eyes . . . sound and sight suddenly failed him, and the deafening roar of a tumultuous cataract drummed and thundered in his ears, drowning all his senses . . .

When he nerved himself to look again, his eyes met his brother's. George was looking fixedly at him . . . he was staring incredulously at George! . . . On his brother's face there was imprinted a look so full of tenderness for him, an expression so charged with patience and resignation and submission to the fate he felt had overtaken him in his acceptance of the call to tread the thorny path of duty, that Thane cried out like a child, unconsciously stretching out his arms in an attitude of supplication; as though a sense of his past unkindness to his brother had overwhelmed him, shattering the pride and stubbornness of that unbending will; as though confessing his sin and imploring forgiveness of George, as in the days of their early boyhood. All resentment, all violence, had died out of his obdurate heart. There remained but his love for his brother, freshly revived throughout his wildly-leaping senses—strong, true, all-possessive as throughout the years of the past. It was Thane, the child, confessing his naughtiness . . . it was George, the boy, with the ever-ready, ever-generous response, carrying consolation and comfort to his little brother. For even as with mute lips Thane thus asked forgiveness, George as instantly understood, and his smile and nod of recognition conveyed the old generous comprehension of the other's need. From the elder brother—in this second of time, amid the raging of the combatants around and behind him—the bitterness of death was taken away; at

peace with Thane, he was content, though the price was the laying down of his life.

As the smile lighted his face, carrying to Thane that forgiveness he craved, the sergeant elbowing him, provoked by his action in refusing to use his rifle upon the enemy, prodded him angrily in the side. The sight was too much for the frenzied Thane. With a screaming oath he charged into the very midst of the commando, laying men to right and left with such amazing strength and wonderful dexterity that the Boers broke and fled before the being who appeared to them to bear a charmed life. They fell back before the impetus of his lightning-like advance, before the leaping Buller and the raining blows, while with ringing cheer upon cheer, with vengeful cries and lusty oaths, the Irregulars followed closely in his wake—over the dead and the dying, over the blood-stained scrub—leaping bush and ant-heap and boulder, on they swept, scattering to right and left the surviving Boers, rounding up the prisoners, chasing those who sought to escape.

But Thane Brandon they left far behind. For when he had reached the spot where, but a moment before, George had sat his horse, smiling across at him, his brother now lay limp upon the veldt—his face to his kinsmen, his back to his countrymen, a bullet through his brain.

III

AS Thane stared wildly—with down-bent eyes and frowning, puzzled brows—the Irregulars fell upon the retreating foe with such force and impetus that charged and chargers were swept almost instantaneously from the spot where their comrades had fallen, and the battle rolled away into the distance and ended as suddenly as it had begun. Away across the immensity of the plain might be noted the flying horsemen, pursued for some little distance by the indefatigable Colonials, jubilant at the taste of hardly-won victory.

But Thane—forgotten in the swift on-rush—stood looking down upon his brother, while the noise of battle rolled further afield, to be presently contrasted by the old quiet and restfulness of the familiar veldt-world. It was then only that realization slowly dawned upon his bewildered brain, and after a pause he stooped and timidly, with hands that shook, turned his brother upon his back; then, sitting down beside him, raised the drooping head upon his arms.

His eyes were hot and dry, his temples throbbed, his reason refused to act, his brain whirled confusedly. His brother he no longer saw, yet he was aware of his presence; aware, too, in some vague, fearful, sub-conscious fashion that an ill-omened shadow had fallen across his path; that though he held George in his arms against his breast, yet it was not George himself that he thus held, but an illusion, a shadowy image called up from the recesses of his over-heated brain—stunned by the thunder and clamour, the blows and buffetings, the whistling and singing

of bullet and shot that had been so inextricably blended during the raging of the short, sharp conflict but barely past.

Later on, as compelled gently toward a return of his understanding by soothing contact with the stillness of the wild, dreamy, open veldt ; of the fresh, translucent, air ; of the very desolation surrounding him—the truth sank into his mind, piercing his heart, touching his soul with an icy dread, with such a fear as had never before touched his bold nature. The fear and the dread touched the portals of his being ; it was as though the dread, cold hand of death itself were laid upon his heart, quenching all vitality and warmth within his frame beneath its icy pressure. His heart faint with horror, his mind black with fear, his consciousness stunned before the oncoming of full realization, his body drenched with cold sweat of terror—Thane, staring with unseeing eyes at the dead man, suddenly drew George closer within his arms, crying in an imploring, frantic tone : “ George ! George ! old chap ! how is it with you, man ? They haven’t hurt you much, have they ? ”

He fell again into unreason, stupefied to the point of insensibility by the blow that had fallen, swift as a bolt from the blue, upon his late exultation of the preceding moments. He was stunned—not alone by the fact, unnerving in itself, that his brother had been actually present among the enemy whom they had been so fiercely opposing, but that he was made one with those sturdy sons of the soil defending their mother-land, who within the last ten minutes of time had laid down their lives for the freedom of that land so dear to them. It was George, and not another—soldier, patriot, victim of far-reaching issues started afar from the scene of their bitter finality and leading in their conclusion to a condition of civil warfare—who had thus met death on the battle-field,

As he wondered—now dully, now overcome by the touch of that black, icy horror—Thane heard himself called, and looked with unseeing eyes on his returning comrades, who, flinging themselves from their sweating horses, bent over the burden he held jealously within his arms.

"Lay him down, Brandon," said the little Army-surgeon, and with a muttered: "Oh . . . it's you, Doctor," Thane obeyed.

"Leave him to Doc, Brandon. . . . Come away for a bit, old man," urged his friends, sympathetically—one glance at the still form and calm face confirming their worst fears. But Thane, trembling and ashy pale, motioned them aside as with burning eyes he followed every movement of the surgeon. Mac-Mac—as the men of the contingent had affectionately named the plucky little doctor—while he went through the formalities of opening the shirt-collar, and putting his ear to the heart of the dead man, was nerving himself to the hard task of answering the question hovering on the lips of the distracted Thane.

"You don't give him up? . . . He's not a dead man?" he asked, in the voice of a man hoarse and tired.

The doctor waited a moment; dead silence fell upon the little group. Mac-Mac knew he must speak . . . it was infernally hard upon him . . . these scenes were beginning to spoil his enjoyment of life . . .

"He'd not have suffered at all," he said awkwardly enough; then seeing from Thane's face the doubt that still clouded his mind, he spoke plainly. "Death would have been instantaneous . . . bullet in the brain . . . no suffering, though; let that be your consolation, Brandon, if—" he added, rising to his feet and addressing his remarks to the men who stood by—"if there is any sort of consolation to be derived from the whole infernal business of War."

Then: "Help him, there!" he cried sharply, as Thane's big figure swayed, his arm swinging out helplessly. They caught him as he would have fallen, and helped him to a seat on the grass; then stood silently by as he sat bending forward, his elbows resting upon his knees, his face buried in his hands. The doctor put a flask to his lips, but he pushed it impatiently aside. Low mutterings of agony that no physical pain could have forced from his obdurate will escaped from his tortured heart, while from his stiff lips there fell curses and blasphemies which, uttered in

the presence of that silent form, brought a sense of infinite horror to his hearers, rough though their lives had been. It was terrible to them to see the burly figure attempt to rise. It was heart-rending to see him as often fall nervelessly upon his knees, while the sweat poured from the haggard, pallid face and the red-rimmed, haunted eyes were frightful to look upon. But, despite his desperate efforts to shake off the deadly collapse of mind and body that was gradually stealing over him, threatening to overpower him, that was forcing him to the ground in its iron grip, Thane sank beneath the effects of the blow, finally coming down in a heap upon the bosom of mother-earth within a hand's reach of his brother.

"Thank the Lord for this respite for the poor chap," said the doctor, "it's been a fearsome sight, boys!" They carried him from the spot and laid him in an open patch of scrub, higher up the slope, near where the camp-fires were already leaping high, piled with dry brushwood which the men had hastily collected. "We want some breakfast after this business," they told each other as they talked together in lowered tones of the poor chap stretched on the clearing amid the scrub . . . It was a hard case, they said, damned hard! this game of setting the two white races in the sub-Continent at each other's throats—a man must stand in battle against his own brother. . . .

Their next service was to wind within the folds of the longest military cloak obtainable the rigid form of the dead man, who was then laid by the side of the other dead; and no means of conveyance being at hand, they bent to the task of hollowing a wide, shallow grave in the nearest patch of sandy soil. Here was War, with its attendant, Death, in its true colours and unvarnished reality! These comrades of theirs, the men scratching at the sandy earth to cover all that was left of them had seen but half-an-hour previously full of life and vigour, charging their enemies furiously, and leaping their horses like wolves; now there they lay in a long row, side by side, stark and still, as insensible as the stones on the veldt!

"Oh, curse the war!" said the little medico, "and cursed be all who bring it about!" He was still chafing under the remembrance of that horrible half-hour he had gone through in the after-math of victory. "I thought he was never coming round," this to the brusque, stern-faced commanding officer, who had ridden up on his return from the chase to make special inquiries after Thane Brandon, whose tragic story had already reached him.

"And now?" he asked, laconically.

"Now he sits over there," the doctor's thumb jerked toward the patch in the scrub, "dumb . . . his head between his hands. Who can make him eat, or drink, or speak? Not I; yet something must be done to rouse him or——" he tapped his temples significantly.

After a moment's pause, the officer turned and walked to the clearing. Round the edge of the low bush he found Thane in the attitude described. In silence, unperceived, he stood for long looking on the young Transvaaler; all his own private sufferings for a friend, treacherously betrayed to death, revived and intensified.

'When stones weep they shed tears of blood,' and a mist, blood-red in hue, veiled the eyes of this once kindly-natured man, whose heart had turned to iron and whose brain had been kindled to frenzy under the weight of a cruel blow inciting every sense within him to the perpetration of a hastily-provoked retaliation of the death of his comrade. His voice, when he spoke, was deeply compassionate.

"Brandon, this is rough luck."

Thane uplifted red-rimmed, bloodshot, vacant eyes. The other stooped to his side, holding his hand closely between his own as he talked in the simply-sincere tones that, in some dim fashion, restored the sense of normality to the huddled figure by his side. Again Thane attempted to stumble to his feet.

"I—must—take—him—home," he muttered, thickly.

"We will help you, Brandon . . . I'll get Jimmy Smith to go along with you . . . you're good pals, aren't you?"

Thane nodded vacantly.

"Pull yourself together, my boy; eat, drink, though the world has gone for us . . . men can't afford to sit down and hug their griefs . . . Eat, my boy, so that strength will come back to you; and when you've buried your poor brother, then it will be up and after them again . . . a man gets a chance to forget the sorrow while hell is let loose around him on the battle-field . . ."

And Thane nodded and staggered blindly upward, only to sag again in a heap upon the veldt.

"Wait, my boy," said the officer, and fetched him food and a pannikin of coffee. Thane swallowed the hot, black liquid, but pushed aside the bread and bully-beef. His friend understood, and said nothing.

Then, in silence, while the dead were being laid to rest in that shallow bed on the sandy patch of veldt, he sat recapturing his bodily nerve and strength for the task before him. He heard the quavering voice of the little doctor, whose province it was to play the chaplain's part in the absence of that functionary, rattling aloud in jerks and snatches the phrases of the Lord's Prayer. It was the doctor's invariable substitute for the orthodox service. "Believe me, the poor chaps like it a deal better than all that other high falutin'," he was wont to impress upon his hearers; though, at the conclusion of the prayer, he would as invariably add the "dust to dust; ashes to ashes" of the proper ritual. The sandy earth fell noiselessly—soft as powdery fleeces of snow—upon the silent, cloaked forms filling that common grave. Comrades heaped in the earth, then raised a boulder of stones; and so, their sad duty over, the troop was marshalled into order and crossed the intervening strip of veldt to take possession of the farmstead of Venter's Hoek standing solitary and broken as it faced the battle-field, once the home of a united and happy family, but now—with shattered walls, windowless and roofless—a testimony to the cruel havoc wrought by the war in this back-veldt of the Northern Transvaal.

IV

THE tale of that last sad journey—of that marvellous feat following upon the tragic meeting of two brothers face to face on a Transvaal battle-field—when the younger Brandon, bearing in his arms his elder brother, rode mile upon mile across the wastes of the wide, solitary plain, back to The Outspan, who among those who knew and loved the gentle, chivalrous George and the hot-tempered but lion-hearted Thane can recall unmoved from the ghost-haunted chamber of the heart where are hidden the memories of those dark days of the Anglo-Boer War? Certain it is that the rare moral courage shown by the elder Brandon in the performance of what appeared to him as a duty, and the superb physical endurance displayed by the younger Brandon in the performance of an act of brotherly devotion, was each in its own particular way one of those deeds of heroism springing from among the dwellers in those humble, scattered homes of the veldt-world which lightens for every white South African with a touch of Heaven's undimmed brightness the lurid picture of the grim struggle of those days of bloodshed and battle and death. Nor can the history of these two brothers, upon whom the tragic happenings of the war fell in fullest severity, serve to fail to bring home to the hearts of both the Dutch-speaking people of South Africa as forcibly as to English-speaking South Africans the abiding sense of this outstanding fact: that the sufferings caused by the war fell equally upon the one as the other! The graves of

our battle-fields cover bitter memories, but these memories are common to both the white races of South Africa. Upon the realization of this incontestable truth alone, upon the genuine endeavour of both Dutch-speaking as well as English-speaking South Africans to comprehend this truth, depends the future well-being of South Africa. For to comprehend is to forgive, and in mutual forgiveness alone lies the basis of true union.

* * * *

Jimmy Smith, returned from a fruitless quest at the broken-down farmhouse, rode back to the opening in the scrub, leading by the bridle-reins the captured Roona. Missing her master, the big bay had remained in the neighbourhood of the battle-field, quietly cropping at the herbage, waiting in wise animal-fashion the return of the accustomed step. Thane, now on his feet, threw back his powerful shoulders as he accosted the young Australian.

"Any luck?" he questioned briefly.

"No wheel conveyance of any kind or class," Smith replied. "Boers must have carried off everything last time they were round."

Thane nodded, his eyes fixed darkly on the still form wrapped in the long cloak, over which he kept guard.

"Shall we——?" Smith began, hesitatingly; then turned his eyes questioningly in the direction of the newly-heaped mound on the veldt, "I could get some of our fellows to come over from the farmhouse and help."

But: "No," Thane returned, huskily. "No, Smith, I'll do it . . . I'll take him home, with only you to come along of us . . . I told Cap I wouldn't have any of the others."

"But, old man," began Smith again, when his friend interrupted with a fierce: "He goes back to The Outspan, if I carry him on my shoulders every inch of the way."

Smith gazed longingly towards the farmhouse where his comrades were enjoying food and rest, smoking lazily as they stretched themselves at full length in the shadow of

scrub or boulder, drowsing and recuperating their wearied senses and persons after their late strenuous exertions. But he was a good-hearted fellow, and for the friendship he bore the Brandon family he determined to stand by this wilful son of The Outspan.

Thane lifted his dark brows to scrutinize narrowly the condition of the three horses. Then he made up his mind, resolving upon an attempt of the plan which he had been considering.

"Smith," he said, quietly, "you'll get on your own nag and ride ahead—five or six miles—leading Roona. There wait for me."

"But you—I don't understand."

"I'll come along slow—Buller here will carry us—the two of us," he repeated, huskily. "I reckon he's good for that distance. Then I'll take Roona and you'll go ahead again, leading my horse . . . understand, eh? That's how we'll manage it . . . I'll take him home . . ."

His voice slid to a low mutter. Smith, horrified, and convinced of the impossibility of the task to which he had set himself, attempted a further protest.

"But, my dear chap, aren't you over-estimating your strength? . . . How could any man? . . . You'll never . . ."

The protest died on his lips, and he stood staring, unable to move hand or foot at the task of assistance, staring only at the deft, strong movements of the young giant before him. Bending his square shoulders and broad chest, with a putting forth of his full strength, Thane, with slow deliberation, stooped and gathered in the crook of his right arm the lifeless form. George lay easily across the broad expanse of his brother's breast, his head resting upon the strong right shoulder, while with his left hand Thane caught lightly at the reins of the stoutly-built Buller, swinging himself dexterously into the saddle. It was a feat the easier of performance, in that in happier times both the brothers had practised this deft art of swinging to saddle encumbered by a heavy weight. To Thane, with the

successful performance of the action, came a blurred recollection of the feat oft-times accomplished under happier circumstances, when with Margery or Johanna in his arms he had mounted Buller, with George standing by applauding his giant prowess and marvellous agility.

But of all this Smith knew nothing, so continued to stare blankly ; while Thane, realizing that the weight that now lay within his embrace was a dead weight and helpless, must needs grip tightly, as Buller—scared somewhat by the unusual burden—danced upon his hind legs. The master's voice rang out a low command, and the horse, subdued to quiet, moved steadily along across the virgin veldt in the direction of the rough wagon-track that led by way of World's View to The Outspan. Then at last it was that Jimmy Smith caught a long breath and let fall a dozen round oaths indicative of blended amazement and admiration ; and catching at Roona's bridle, he, too, mounted his steed, passing Thane and his burden with a brief " So long ! " as he rode briskly ahead, moving into the distance of the billowy, undulating plain, leaving his friend to follow slowly.

Slowly the gallant Buller, with his double burden, moved onward, covering mile after mile of the homeward journey. Slowly, through his master's seething brain, swept the train of scorching remembrances held within the last few hours. Behind that double burden of the living and the dead there fell into its old quiet the scene of the day's earliest dawn. Now upon that islet of the veldt-world, rudely disturbed for some few seconds of time and space by the short but sharp conflict—while the crack of the rifle, and the shout of the conqueror, and the cry of the wounded, and the groan of the dying, had hurtled through the calm air—there settled once again the silence of the simmering noonday. Before it, through the cloudless expanse of atmosphere, was visible the overshadowing mountain—the goal to which the rider pressed—blue in the far distance. The murmur of insect life fell soothingly on the hot air, and the bird rose songless

out of its nest in the grass. All remained unchanged, all things around him appeared as throughout his life he had known them to be—all, save the ending of this life but lately throbbing vigorously as his own. Thane cursed the war, cursed the circumstances leading to the war, as he moved slowly onward.

From hour to hour, throughout the long day, when the blinding, burning rays of the mid-day sun struck scorchingly down upon his defenceless head—with blistering lips and parched throat he rode; changed horses, and rode again. As day waned and World's View appeared but a stone's throw from the spot where he lay—worn out and faint, Jimmy Smith rubbing his paralyzed right arm—both men recognized the true distance still to be traversed before the track directly below that highest point would be reached.

"You can't do it, dear old chap . . . you'll never do it . . . Let me go ahead and bring over a cart from your place, while you rest here."

"I'd rather take him, Smith . . . I'd rather . . ." gasped the other.

"But you can't, old man; you're done for, and the horses are done for," objected Smith, compassionately.

Thane was silent, though by no means convinced. After a pause, he said, brokenly:

"Smith, it's like this . . . the having him when they hear the news will help Margery—I'm afraid for her . . . the having him to see to will help her and father a bit—just at the first go off. 'How are they going to be told it?' is what I've been asking myself as we came along . . . The best thing I can do for 'em is to put George in their arms . . . he'll speak to them somehow . . . If there's a God, He'll let George speak to them as he always has spoken to us—comforting-like, when one's in trouble," and Smith nodded comprehendingly.

The sun was sinking—bidding a short adieu to the warm, sleepy earth-world in a burst of radiance that turned to bars of gold and azure and crimson the carpet of the

heavens. Thane lay silent, with down-bent face, until that brilliance had faded into a soft, velvet-grey out of which pinpricks of silver gradually emerged. Then he rose with difficulty, moving stiffly over to where the horses stood together with drooping heads and heaving flanks. Moisture drenched their glistening sides. Waterless and unfed, bearing alternately throughout the burning hours of the long day that double burden, both Roona and Buller were in a state of collapse. Roona, however, Thane judged, might carry the burden still further.

"For a couple of miles, Smith . . . we'll try . . ."

He felt the sturdy bay sag beneath the weight as he balanced himself in the saddle and caught his feet within the stirrups—felt he could go but very slowly now. Step by step through the closing-in of the evening, seeming as vague, shadowy forms through the dim light, men and horses moved wearily along the track winding now around the base of World's View. Darkness had fallen ere they passed within a stone's throw of the dimly-looming homestead, with its closed doors and windows upon which the starlight struck, causing them to glitter faintly, beckoning as it seemed with persistent entreaty to the dead master to halt and dismount and cross once again the portals of his dwelling. Jimmy Smith, sick at heart, the tears running down his tanned, brick-red cheeks, turned his eyes from that silvery radiance stealing across the darkness as though seeking to lure back to his home the dead man. He kept ahead, pulling at Buller's bridle and moving along in the silence that had fallen upon them for the last hour. Then his horse, treading on a loose stone, floundered, and he dismounted. "I'll lead them down this rough bit," he said, sending his voice through the darkness. Roona, too, had stumbled badly and seemed unable to carry further. "Help me down," Thane muttered in a stifled, hoarse voice.

His strength, too, was done; he was shaken as by an ague; his brain reeled! . . . There, before him, on the plateau, nestling against the mountain-side, loomed the

shadowy outline of his brother's home. Never more would he return to it; pass up and down the familiar pathway on his daily visit to The Outspan . . . never again take pride in his barley and wheat-lands; till his soil; work with his flocks and herds . . . never again! . . . It was hard to realize this "never"—to realize that they had lost him; that they would no more see that broad, well-built figure; that fair, kindly brow; those deep-set, gentle blue eyes lighting up the pleasant face; nor hear that voice ever breathing a spirit of strong affection for those dearest to him, a spirit of tolerance and kindness for his fellow men! A groan forced itself from Thane's lips at the realization that George was, for the last time, passing in sight of his home.

The dogs, barking furiously, rushed to greet their master—then slunk back to the homestead—all but Nella, George's favourite pointer, who crouched on the veldt, howling dismally. Thane shook himself fiercely, bending his thoughts, to the exclusion of all else, upon the conclusion of his task. With the stir of the old sense of passion in his veins, strength returned to him and the power to lift that dead weight from its last rest upon the journey until it was finally laid upon the threshold of The Outspan. With George carried now in both arms, with Nella, scared and whimpering, at his heels—Thane staggered, stumbled, recovered his footing and turned out of the cart-track into the footpath leading directly to the old home. His walk became almost a run. Smith—leading the horses by the lengthier, but less rugged cart-road—cried aloud to his frightened senses that the man had gone clean off his head, for surely a maniacal strength alone could further lift and carry the dead weight of that heavy burden! . . .

Past the grassy patch where he had lingered with Jo—past that silent, fathomless pool into which as a boy George had fallen to defend his little brother's honour—across the length of the rustic bridge creaking ominously beneath the double weight, as though muttering of that afternoon six months previously when he had stood upon

it casting hard words at the dead man he now carried upon his breast—along the bank of the dark, unresting waters whispering now of death, and parting, and sorrow—Thane moved heavily, swaying from side to side as a drunken man . . . his breath escaping from his labouring lungs in sharp, sobbing gasps . . . his body chilled by the icy sweat that drenched his frame . . . his lips bloodless . . . "*God! God!*" he cried sharply, and then held his peace. The cry fell unconsciously, for it was not to a God that he looked to carry out to its bitter finality this dread task, but to his own indomitable tenacity of purpose, to his own implacable will, to his iron nerve and to the superb putting forth of his manhood's strength.

V

BLINDLY he staggered on, still forcing his pace, his arms tightening around his burden. He could hear old Rover from the front premises barking furiously. He could hear the low whimpering of Nella at his heels. Then a light suddenly struck upon his sight, issuing from the dining-room. The door leading on to the back verandah was thrown open. He saw in the doorway the face of his father, framed in the grey of his short bushy beard and silvering hair . . . then Margery . . . then Woodward.

"Someone is coming up the garden." Margery's anxious eyes were the first to detect the dark, lurching form; her quickened senses the first to catch the sound of that labouring, gasping breath, of those quick, shuffling steps. "It's Thane, isn't it?" she called aloud, reassuringly, as she hurried down the steps to the gravelled pathway. . . When again would the echoing musical tones of her haunting voice ring out with that note of quick, ready sympathy, of content and courage? Woodward asked himself, his heart's worst forebodings confirmed.

Thane lurched ahead of her, laying his burden across the threshold of the old home. To the lookers-on it appeared but a dark, cumbersome, cloaked object.

"What is it?" Margery called out, sharply. She snatched the candle from her father, holding it aloft so that the flickering rays fell directly upon Thane's gaunt, hollowed face; upon his red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes; upon his dishevelled and stained garments; upon his blue lips, which opened and closed with difficulty as he

mumbled with spent breath, his voice low and exhausted as the voice of the dying :

"It's George," he said, simply, "he's been shot . . . I've brought him home . . ."

Scarcely understanding—the cry of horror that fell from their lips was evoked, not by any sense of harm that might possibly have befallen George, but by the spectacle of the frightful object presented by Thane's appearance as he stood there before them on the gravelled pathway with haggard, ashen face from which had been wiped as with a sponge all the old beauty and vigour and comeliness of his hardy manhood. That face was now withered, aged, broken. There was stamped upon it the ravages wrought by the mental suffering and physical strain of the terrible hours through which he had just passed. With a gaze of wildest horror Margery stared closely, inquiringly, into the changed and terrible face of her brother, and in return the burning eyes gazed into hers as though conscious of horror, and remorse, and shame ; while the blue lips, moving soundlessly, whispered of "*George*" and "*George*" . . . and in the dark background the faithful Nella—with hairs bristling and jaws slobbering—crouched and whined and whimpered as Woodward and old Brandon stooped simultaneously to the dark object at which Thane pointed persistently.

"What the devil is it ? What's gone wrong with you, boy ?" questioned old Brandon, fiercely, as his heart started to beat furiously. But Thane, with no further explanation, merely continued his low, unintelligible mutter the while his massive figure swayed and sagged slowly earthward.

VI

ALL through the remaining hours of darkness were the sounds as of a stir—of coming and going, of weeping and lamenting—in the home of the Brandons ; for the heir to The Outspan lay dead, and the natives—in their own peculiar, speedy, stealthy, noiseless fashion—had conveyed the tidings to their people in the neighbourhood of The Outspan and the Top Farm ere Thane had recovered from that long stupor of insensibility into which he had sunk.

First to visit the death-chamber where lay the pride and hope of the family, the flower of the flock—their kindly friend and master—came the stable-boys, headed by the wrinkled Jonas—now aged and bent and feeble, but still as ever cocksure that the Almighty had but few such precious boys to spare from among His shining hosts in the angel-world, on loan as specially valuable gifts to earth-world fathers and mothers, as this most gracious boy and man, whom he, Jonas himself, had rescued when a child from the jaws of the monster haunting that bottomless pool.

“He’s gone,” said Jonas, the tears running down his wrinkled black cheeks, “and we couldn’t expect but what he’d be wanted up there again sooner than another.”

The stable-boys had been followed by the herd-boys, and these again by the field-hands and piccaninnies—by every man and boy belonging to the double homesteads. Finally came the women ; weeping and wailing ; old Lisbeth—whose hand alone had been permitted to help

Margery, as she lingered over her bitter task of this final loving service to her brother—stood looking tearlessly on, approving of this loud outburst of wail and sorrow as indicative of what was but right and due to her beloved nursling. Down from the huts of the Top Farm homestead swarmed the frightened, chattering natives—the women, carrying the babies tied to their backs—the girls, big and little, all headed by old Sanna, the cook, beating her withered breast and crooning to her companions of how in the deep of the night she had heard a rushing sound, such as of Death the horseman galloping swiftly by, while the Master's dog howled and whined like a thing possessed by fear at the presence of the Unseen.

* * * *

Aletta awoke at the usual early hour, and wondered at the uncanny stillness. "Jo, wherever can those servants be?—surely never yet in their huts—the lazy *schepsel*? I must go and wake them."

She thrust her arms into the sleeves of her print bedgown, drew her *kappie* over her fair, tousled hair, and reaching up to a peg for the *sjambok* unbarred and opened the house-door, letting in a shaft of light from the rising sun.

"Sun-up, and those lazy devils not yet to the milking!" She hurried across the short stretch of sparkling, bedewed scrub leading to the huts, quaffing in great draughts of invigorating, fragrant air, cracking the *sjambok* loudly. "Come out! . . . Come out there, you folk . . . Piet! Zwart-boy! Sanna! Come out, people! . . . Come out, you swilled swine! Are you all dead?—or what?"

Grim, unwonted silence alone greeted her strongly-framed request. Frightened, she knew not why, Aletta peered searchingly into the dark recesses of each dimly-lighted hut in turn, only to find each alike empty, each alike deserted by the inmates. She called aloud to her sister, sending her full voice sounding shrill and loud across the unbroken silence, "Jo! Jo! Here, Jo!"

and her sister appeared at the open doorway in her night-gown, yawning sleepily.

"Jo! Jo! something is up!" cried Aletta, hurrying towards her. "The natives have cleared out! . . . they are off—men, women and children! Whatever can it be?"

"They've heard, perhaps, that the Boers are coming: you know how quickly they get to hear news," suggested Jo, frightened at the import of her own words; for if the Boers were coming, certain it was that they had gained the victory in the expected conflict; and, if this were so, what of Thane on the losing side?

"What nonsense!" returned Aletta, sharply. "I only wish it were—that they were coming—for that would mean a beating for the Irregulars."

"So it would," agreed Jo, helpless and afraid.

"*Toch! Toch!*" grumbled Aletta. "Such happenings are enough to drive a poor woman stark mad! The cattle there—all waiting to be milked; the animals, all wanting food and drink. Come, Jo, we must dress and go and find help."

"Where?" asked Jo.

"To The Outspan, of course," Aletta snapped crossly, as they hastily flung on their clothes. "They must, at least, find us boys to do the milking. *Toch!* then, to think of those poor cattle bellowing out there for human beings to care for their needs, and those devils of blacks clearing off. Don't stop to do your hair, Jo; you needn't come further than the bridge."

They slipped down the rough foot-path over whose loose pebbles Thane had stumbled some few hours previously. The familiar pathway recalled to the mind of the elder sister a dream of the past night. "Truth! Jo, but I feel muddled with it all . . . Such a strange sort of waking dream as I had in the night, of a company of our dead—riding along—past the house—down this very footpath——"

"Aletta!" shrilled Jo, her hand laid impulsively on her

sister's arm ; " for God's sake, hold your tongue, woman ! Don't you know it brings ill-luck to tell one's dreams before breakfast ? "

" Don't be so superstitious, girl ! How can telling the dream help or hinder, since if it was sent by the Lord it must surely fulfil itself ? But, Jo, as they rode by there was a fearful barking of dogs . . . and in my dream, it seemed to me they were our own dogs barking, and rushing towards the horsemen ; and I could hear Nella whimpering and howling . . . I could see her stiff and scared . . . all her hair rising in terror, for, animal-like, she could perceive that band of the dead passing our front door."

" *Toch !* Aletta, but what a fearsome dream ; and now that you mention the barking of the dogs, I seem to think that I, too, heard them barking furiously in the night—or was I, too, but dreaming ? " asked Jo, wrinkling her white brow in sudden perplexity.

" Or was I dreaming ?—or did we really hear them barking ? And could it have been a troop of living men galloping past ? " questioned her sister in return. " Truth ! but I'm muddled, Jo, for now that I come to think over all the strange happenings of the morning, I remember—I meant to have told you sooner—that when I opened the house-door this morning, Nella was nowhere to be seen."

" But she must have been somewhere about——" began her sister.

" I looked, but could see nothing of her," Aletta interrupted. " It's awfully strange, for ever since George left she has never slept anywhere but across the doorstep, as though guarding me."

They were within sight of the bridge, and looking down upon the stream Jo caught sight of two forms moving along the rush-bordered pathway leading from du Bruyn's Rust. The leading figure was tall and upright, and clad in the easily-distinguishable khaki. A pace behind the soldier, a bulky, rotund form, swathed in a loose black

gown and wearing a black cotton *kappie* on its head, rolled along with a frantic attempt at speed.

"But, Aletta! *look! look!*" she cried, seizing her sister's arm in a tight grip. "Surely that's never Ma coming along there! . . . and yet—"

"Yes, my word! it's Ma! And the man—not Thane?" Aletta asked, straining her eyes in the effort to obtain a clearer view.

"No—it's that Australian—Woodward, isn't it?"

"*Toch! Toch!* Jo, but what can it all mean? My God! but I'm frightened, Jo! What are they coming about?—together, too—and at this early time of the morning?"

"Ma, perhaps, coming to see you in the cool of the day . . . and may have met the captain," replied Jo, but without conviction in her tones.

"It's not that . . . If George—*Toch!* then, but I don't know what to think!"

Jo broke into a run, but Aletta, a faintness overpowering her, sat down on the grass by the side of the track awaiting the hearing of news which she felt would be of an unpropitious nature; her fair, comely face had grown muddy and pallid; her heart beat to suffocation.

She heard Jo question Woodward and, on receiving his reply, cry out sharply. . . Then it might be Thane . . . God would be merciful, and spare the righteous and slay the ungodly . . . George or Thane . . . Thane or George . . . Upon her brain was traced in fiery characters the name of either brother, stamping each alternately on her confused senses; her lips repeated each name in succession, mechanically and apart from any conscious intention.

Then her mother was waddling up to where she sat, panting:

"My poor chest! . . . My poor widowed child! . . . *Ach! Ach! Almachtig!* To think that the Lord should have let it be my poor *schoen-son!*—mowed down along with our brave burghers, while those godless *schelms* escaped!"

"George!" screamed Aletta, springing to her feet and facing Woodward. "Not George!—my God!—not George!"

Woodward bowed his head, saying bluntly:

"Your husband fell like a soldier, Mrs. Brandon."

"Fell dead?" she questioned wildly.

"Shot through the brain—he did not suffer," he added briefly.

"And to be buried this very morning, an hour after sun-up," wailed Tante Jacoba. "And my coffin already taken along to the house for him—lucky it was a full-sized man's, and not made to my measure," she added incoherently. "*Toch! Toch!* The dear Lord be merciful to us! Dead—and to be buried in less than an hour! And in my coffin, too, over which the dear, gracious soul was ever fond of having his little joke."

"Where is he? . . . I must go to him . . . Jo! Ma! help me to go to my husband!" Aletta quavered in shrill, horrified tones. Then she sank again heavily to the grass and the three women wept in each other's arms.

VII

THE weeks had slipped by since that early morning when George Brandon had been lowered into the resting-place prepared for him by the side of his mother and little ones. In the small, grass-grown cemetery adjoining the garden, the birds—from leafy branches of tall poplars and gracefully-swaying syringas—sang and twittered and whistled incessantly and joyously throughout the cool of the day, while from the drooping willows nearer the stream the low, melancholy note of the ring-dove struck across that outpouring of rapture as insistently as sorrow across joy, as dark across light, as death across life—and the rushing waters, purling over their gravel bed, voiced untiringly a ceaseless requiem for the dead.

Up on the mountain side, overlooking the cemetery, the cottage sheltered Jo in her unbearable restlessness, watched over jealously by Aletta, anxious for the success of her plan. Upon Jo's retirement into privacy for a time the success of that plan depended, and since no member of the household at The Outspan had set foot upon the Top Farm since the death of its master this task of keeping Jo out of their sight was the easier of accomplishment. Aletta, in turn, was maternally guarded by Tante Jacoba, who, in seemingly frank simplicity, accepted and advertised the theory of the expected advent of an heir to the dead master's possessions, and with guileless ingenuousness pressed home this truth whenever opportunity offered upon the suffering Brandons.

"*Maar*, see you, Mynheer Brandon," she explained in

kindly, confidential fashion to the head of the family as he gloomed in a basket-chair on the back verandah one languorous afternoon some three weeks after his son's death; "see you, in the coming of this babe—a *jonge* my heart assures me it will be—the hand of the dear Lord who kills and makes alive, as the Book says. George, most sweet and gracious son, you have lost: *Heer!* Brandon, but so it is by the will of the Lord; yet see, his child comes to fill his place in the world, to take his share of the love in your hearts, and——" she added pointedly, throwing under lowered eyelids a sly, keen glance in the direction of the coffee-tray, "to step into his father's inheritance."

Brandon—although somewhat puzzled by this sudden announcement, sprung upon them since the death of his son—was innocent of any suspicion of possible deception in the matter, and merely, as before, acknowledged Tante Jacoba's assertions as to the providential arrival of the child by a curt nod as he puffed moodily at his pipe. Since the blow had fallen upon him the man had grown morose, speaking even less than had been his former wont; Tante Jacoba detected in his looks and bearing unmistakable sign of the rapid process of decay. "It's just as well to have the child acknowledged while the old man is above ground," she thought, shrewdly, "that will settle the two——" She glanced at Margery, of whose objections she had felt afraid. "But she is too beaten down to fight . . . she has got past caring," she reflected complacently, watching Margery—whiter-faced than ever in her black dress—as she sat dispensing the afternoon coffee; but from those set lips came no word of dissent.

"Thanks, child," said Tante Jacoba, receiving from Babs' small, plump hand a third cup of her favourite beverage, "and did you put the sugar in, my child?"

"Margery did," Babs answered shortly; the tragedy of George's death still lay with so passionate an intensity of bitterness upon her warmly-affectionate heart as had left her feeling too sore and heavy even to play at being

naughty. The game of tormenting the old Tante, too, had lost its zest.

"Now that the sugar has come through, my child," the Boer woman went on in kindly tones, "I'll make you some *mooi komfyt*, soon as ever we cut our water-melons."

"Say 'thank you,' Babs," Margery said, softly

But Babs only humped up her shoulders as she returned to the coffee-tray. She stood by Margery's side, listlessly dipping her rusk into the steaming liquid.

"*Ach! ja!*" sighed Tante Jacoba; "the child, like the rest of us, finds the good food and drink—now that we have got it—but as muck and bitterness in the mouth! But the coming of the little one will cheer her . . . *Ach! ja!*" she sighed windily between the noisy gulping-down of her coffee.

Babs raised her head and pricked up her ears.

"What little one is coming, Margery?" she demanded, loudly; then, without waiting a reply, pressed the question upon Woodward. Tante Jacoba beamed upon the group.

"*Maar*, child, it will be a fine plaything for you; a *mooi poppe*. *Ach! yes.*"

"I am tired of dolls," sighed Babs discontentedly, all her interest vanished since the "little one" meant nothing more than an inanimate doll. How silly and tiresome the old Boer woman could be! she thought irritably, turning her attention once more to soaked rusk.

"Women are *wonnerlyk* creatures," pronounced Tante Jacoba, setting down her cup on the small space of couch left unoccupied by her vast bulk and wiping her heavy, protruding lips and sweat-damped, tallow-coloured cheeks with the hem of her black cashmere apron; "*wonnerlyk!* so say I, who am myself a woman. To have seen my poor widowed child on that black morning when the tidings of her loss came to her, who would have said she will live to bring the child into the world? But Nature won't let the woman go—not while there's another life depending upon hers that's got to be brought into existence. And why? Because Nature's as old as the first man and

woman that set human life a-going. She'd got to people this big world with only Adam and Eve to start upon, and so I reckon she asked the Almighty to give her a free hand over the business. 'If I've got this big job to carry through I must have a free hand,' that's about how she would put it; and the dear Lord, being so much more understanding-like than some of the poor foolish creatures He has made, gave Nature her way in this matter; and thus, whenever we see a *jonge* and a *meisje* together—"she cast her small, twinkling eyes knowingly in the direction of the coffee-tray, "we can safely reckon that there Mother-Nature will be at her old work—old as the first day of the Creation—old as the first chapter of the Book—her work of drawing male to female, female to male, thus replenishing the earth and continuing the races."

Again she sighed windily, then went on :

"*Ach! ja!*—and I said to my girl this very afternoon, 'Come, then, Aletta, you come down with me and see your husband's folk who are your folk as the Book says;' and the poor thing answers me, 'Not yet, Ma; I'll not go over the bridge till I carry George's son in my arms to visit his o' pa.' . . . *Toch! toch!*" added Tante Jacoba with a chuckle of mingled admiration and pity, "the spirit of the woman over her dead husband's coming child!

"And talking of those born without the sense of understanding the nature of their fellow-men," she presently continued—switching the conversation back to the one absorbing topic of the hour since she perceived sufficient had been said on the prime object of her visit, "well, does it not seem too inconceivable to us South Africans—whether Dutch or English—that such a thing as this should be possible! The man and his brother-officer die for their fault—if such it be—of possessing natural human feelings! And at sun-up to-morrow! *Toch!* but that does seem hard! After crossing the ocean and the land, ten thousand miles so they tell me, to fight for England!

Ach! yes! but, indeed, it is hard, and incomprehensible also."

"Scandalous!" growled old Brandon; while Margery, not wishing Babs to be saddened by further reference to the tragedy about to be enacted in their immediate neighbourhood, sent her on a message to the kitchen.

"My dear life, we Transvaalers, thank the Lord, don't put such over-fine interpretations upon men's actions," the Boer woman continued philosophically; "nor do we need to twist our tongues and pull faces when we are obliged to lie; we lie outright and boldly; the bigger the lie the more emphatically we speak it. Does the British General come to our *commandant* and say politely—dear Lord, how politely do these *rooineks* speak!—'My dear sir, your men have been using our passwords, or wearing our uniform, or shooting down our men under cover of the white flag,'—why, of course, our *commandant* would at once look him hard in the face, with eyes wide opened, and would say—with, maybe, a thump of his fist on the table, 'Impossible! the thing could not be! it's a lie trumped up by the enemy! I know my men—they are simple people, but *oprecht*; poor, God-fearing backveldt farmers who ask nothing more than to be left in peace in their homesteads on the veldt; they never would do such mean, dirty, treacherous things! *Almachtig!* Never!' and the British General would go away satisfied." Here Tante Jacoba laughed hugely, until, recollecting she was paying a visit to a house of mourning, she deftly recovered her former lugubrious cast of countenance.


"But, see again, Brandon, when it's the *commandant* who goes complaining to the General, 'Here's the hell to pay,' he says, roughly. 'Your men have shot the Boer prisoners in cold blood—no excusing circumstances whatever—poor, simple, God-fearing farmers doing nothing more than just defending their homes and goods from fire and pillage, and their women from the adulterous clutches of your *verdoemd* godless troopers! Unless you hurry up, and get them punished sharp, we'll fight our

own way, with naught to turn us from war's ruses or hamper us from using dum-dum bullets or decoy white flags ; or from the throwing of shells into hospitals ; or the dynamiting trains ; or the poisoning the sources of springs watering troops and the people shut up in the besieged towns ! You just bestir yourself and send an explanation.' " Tante Jacoba again threw herself back and chuckled hugely. " What answer comes ? Eh ? Margery, you ask the Captain there ; he'll tell you, for he does not serve in a British regiment ; he'll tell us how the polite General words his answer, so soft-like : ' Please, Mr. *Commandant*, please don't do all these things (although we are not at all sure that you are not already doing them) for we promise most certainly to punish the men who have come to fight for England—no home-born sons of Great Britain, let us assure you, but rough, unmanageable sort of chaps hailing from our Overseas Dominions whom, indeed, we don't altogether care to own as blood-brothers. Still, it is true they have come several thousand miles across land and sea for the purpose of helping England to fight the Transvaal, purely out of a silly sort of sentimental feeling for King and Mother-country ; therefore, we shall see to it that they fall by the guns of Great Britain ! ' *Toch ! Toch !* But can any one doubt but that blindness has indeed been sent upon England and upon her people because the dear Lord knows that her day must now draw to its night—her time of greatness must pass to its close—her day of power must come to its end ? " asked Tante Jacoba solemnly, preparing to lift her vast proportions from off the couch. " Run, Babs, my child, and tell them to bring round the cart to the door ; I can no longer walk the hill ; I must ride round by the wagon road. *Ach !* yes ; so the best of us grow old ; and me not hearing word yet of Oom Jan—not knowing whether my man be dead or alive ! "

" No news yet ? " asked Brandon, and she shrilled an "*Ach ! No !*"

Then noting that Margery had taken down the baskets

from a peg on the wall, and was answering in reply to Babs—who caught at one from her hand—that they were going to gather fruit in the lower-lands, where the latest peaches were now ripening: “That’s right, girl,” she said, approvingly. “Don’t you wait for me to climb into the cart; that’s a long business, for I am no longer young and thin. You go, get in your peaches; they’ll just be turning yellow and the proper ripeness for preserve. And the walk will freshen you up—you’re looking but pale and peaked . . . The Captain—” Tante Jacoba concluded, as she offered a limp hand to Woodward in turn with the rest, “the Captain will doubtless do himself the pleasure to go with you and help gather the peaches.”



VIII

IT appeared that it pleased Woodward so to do, for, as the Boer woman's enormous rotundity disappeared from sight within the tented-frame of the stout-wheeled vehicle in which she invariably travelled, he turned to follow Margery and Babs down the garden.

Somewhat awkwardly—since for the past three weeks he had kept aloof from her—he now fell into pace by Margery's side, taking the basket from her hand. Babs, flourishing the other, ran races with the terriers, feeling happier since she saw her two elders once more apparently resuming that former friendliness of intercourse, the cessation of which during the dark days of the past weeks had preyed upon the child's mind and added to her sorrow. Perhaps Margery would be less sad and quiet now, she confided hopefully to the terriers.

Woodward's glance at his companion as he moved silently by her side went unrewarded, for the sun-bonnet hid the set face and veiled eyes. He had, however, no need to look upon that face to remind himself of the changed woman who, during the past days, had moved about the post-house with the old, masked face, the old, silent ways, intensified and heightened a thousandfold. Margery—with her speechless sorrow and hopeless despair and unreasoning grief pressed closely to her bleeding heart—moved through these first days of her loss as a changed being—her form bent and tense, her voice toneless and low, her face white and aged, her eyes veiled and haunted, her sorrow unnamed, unshared. From her

lips no word of anguish, of rebellion or complaint had been heard to fall; but to Woodward's accusing, remorseful conscience her very silence, her changed looks, emphasized the bitterness of that silent grief.

She had lost the old power of intensity of feeling, she told herself, as she moved by the side of the man whose love had formerly restored to her the zest of life, the realization of the force of love. But now she had finally lost all capacity for emotion; something had died within her that never again would stir to life. Never again could the power of the love of this man—great as she still felt that power to be—call from its final resting-place her old self. "This is Death in life," she reflected drearily, "which has robbed me—mercifully it may be—of grace and softness and the power to feel—of the power to love and to receive love; neither is there left me the will to desire."

The sorrow—draped and wrapped about her heart—which held her dead love and her dead hope, held within its dark folds at least one compensation, which dimly she was beginning to see—that no later sorrow could affect her much. It had brought to her, too, some sort of realization of the meaning of the mystery of suffering, the clue to the wretched riddle of life. She had looked life steadily in the face, and, in return, found nothing for it but acceptance, renunciation, endurance for the world of suffering humanity. "We have nothing here below in full measure but misfortune," she had schooled herself to understand and accept.

Woodward's voice came strained and awkward:

"You know, I am leaving in the morning . . . I sent asking to be relieved of further duties here, and my successor comes to take over charge some time this evening."

She desired to maintain an outwardly unbroken friendliness with him to the end. Though she had seen but little of him during the past weeks, though they had had no private speech together, Margery had not been unconscious of his unobtrusive daily acts of thoughtfulness on

her behalf. Without his practical help and courage and resourcefulness, how should she and her stricken father—with Thane in wild delirium to add to the horrors of the situation—have come through those first terrible hours of their loss.

She spoke in low, expressionless tones.

"You leave early?—but you must not go off without breakfast . . . I will see to it that something is got ready."

"No," he said, shortly; "don't trouble, I'm off at daybreak."

A feeling akin to desolation swept for a moment across her deadness of heart, across her indifference to all things. She endeavoured to bring home to herself the reality that a good friend was going for ever out of her life. It meant a fresh renunciation, a fresh resignation; life's dues to be paid to the uttermost farthing—that was all.

"I can't go—" he said, with a sudden sense of anger directed against that masked face and draped soul and hidden personality, which, from the first day of his acquaintanceship with this incomprehensible woman, had baulked and beckoned and baffled him—"I can't go out of your life with this horrible silence hanging between us! Margery, let me hear your voice speaking in its old tones! . . . Reproach me, blame me, but break the silence dividing us!"

She was as a sleep-walker moving without effort or comprehension—her face expressionless, her eyes dull, her voice toneless, as she replied, dully:

"There is nothing to be said."

He was beating his head against a stone wall, battering his heart against a nonentity, he told himself fiercely, as a flame of hot anger roused to quick passion his late subdued pulses. Apart from this woman life held no desire for him; apart from her the old stirring magic of life would henceforth escape his perception; the realm of that imagined world, of finer, rarer essences underlying the apparent would remain for ever closed to him. Mate-

less and disillusioned, he must return to the life from which he had been drawn by the war to scan for a brief moment of time one page of the Book of Realization, opened only to those who glimpse the heights and depths of human love, of human passion.

"There is something you owe it to me to say," he said, speaking with a low, quick intensity of tone. "Won't you say it? Will you let it weigh upon us both when we are apart that you left it unsaid?"

She understood that he was asking of her the same question he had asked on that last afternoon they had spent together. The remembrance of those hours—unbearable as contrasted with this present hour—stirred deep within the consciousness, where she agonized in solitude, a spasm of bitter emotion; but she answered in the same gravely reserved fashion:

"I owe you no explanation."

Her resolve was firm; even to hold this man—whom in her dumb pain she scarcely knew or cared whether she wished to hold—she would not admit the tragedy of the past, nor barter, for what now appeared but a shadowed illusion of happiness, Babs' real interests. Her resolve continued firm as before; but her attitude of seemingly wilful obstinacy, of determined duplicity and unrepentant unkindness, maddened Woodward, hurting his very soul.

"You would let me go—deceived—unpitied? Our love wasn't great enough—for then you never could have acted so heartlessly!" he said, harshly; and her voice, tired and listless, came to his ears:

"I don't blame you . . . it was all a mistake."

"Yes," he replied, bitterly, "it was a mistake—my putting that question to you. . . How I have blamed myself for it—how I have suffered bitterly for it, you never can know! . . . If only—" he added in slow, troubled tones, "if only I had foreseen the blow coming to you that very night—"

She put out her hand as she interrupted sharply:

"Don't speak of that."

There was that in her voice which checked him.

"Come on, you two slow-coaches," cried Babs, who on tiptoe, with a putting forth of all her childish strength, was shaking a heavily-laden peach-bough, bringing down showers of the gleaming yellow fruit.

Margery, to avoid further questioning or urging—which, she felt, could but prolong their mutual suffering—made a decisive movement to join the child; but Woodward laid a detaining hand on her arm, saying impetuously: "I can't give you up—keep your past—whatever it may hold for you is as nothing to me so that you are at my side!"

She shook off his hand with a low:

"We agreed to part . . . it is better so. . . I shall never again love . . . the power has gone out of me."

"No, no! It is night with you now, Margery, but the dawn must come . . . only believe that my love is strong enough to help you through the darkness and the dawn . . . to ask nothing . . . to forgive anything—everything, so long as I have you, dear."

His voice trembled with rough emotion as he leaned towards her, looking into that cold, set face with the hard lines about the mouth and the dazed look in the dry eyes. Again she appeared to him as one of that disfranchised multitude of women whose ears are for ever closed to the hearing of the Song of Songs; whose lives are doomed to be passed in Sorrow's temple.

As she stood before him, a vague echo of that nameless haunting music—that new, sweet tune beating across the greyness of life—recurred to her deadened senses, arousing within her a conception of all she was losing. She suffered intensely, yet her pride and determination would not allow her to confess her past; and to what end, therefore, she asked herself, would be her acceptance of the love Woodward now offered her—a generous love, asking nothing, forgiving everything, though he promised it would be—since without mutual understanding and

mutual confidence what could follow upon their union but further misunderstandings, deeper suffering, the final irrevocable break? It was the clear revelation of this truth, the abiding assurance that without fullest explanation of that past—which she resolved should remain undisclosed—the acceptance of his generous offer, the giving of herself to him could but end in disaster and renewed, heightened suffering, that enabled Margery to find the strength and courage to put from her the temptation to yield to his passionate prayer to her to seek solace and consolation in their mutual love—though this love she felt to be as warm and true and ardent as when they had lingered together in the hour of its fulness upon the mountain-top. It was the realization of this hard truth that gave her the strength and the nerve to conceal her real feelings, and to answer his entreaty with a repetition of her former words:

"We have said our farewells . . . let us part in friendship."

"But I love you," he interrupted hotly, "you—yourself——"

"It is too late," her voice was sad and toneless, "there is nothing to love about me now . . . I am hard, Phil—I am a wreck . . . sorrow has taken away my freshness and softness . . . tears have thinned my cheeks and washed away my bloom . . . despair has robbed me of womanly graciousness and sympathy, of the power to love and to awake love . . . I am withered . . . I am as a dead woman . . . believe me, dear friend, there is nothing to love about me now."

"Look at me! look me in the face and tell me that!" he cried, masterfully. "Margery, life has been hard, but it will at least spare you from ever knowing that worst, hard fate—the fate of the unloved; for you have crept into my heart of hearts, dearest, and I could not if I would dislodge you from your stronghold there."

She made no answer, only held him fixed by a momentary gaze. Sorrow for him stirred at the numb conscious-

ness within her heart ; but her resolve held firm, her will remained obdurate, even as he spoke again with quick intensity.

"Don't you understand? You will come to me as you promised ! I ask nothing—I care nothing—for what you do not choose to tell me, Margery ! Believe me, dearest, I am bitterly sorry for ever having questioned you . . . your past is your own . . . give me only the present and the future ; you will, Margery, for, as you yourself said, love like ours can never die ! Come to me, then, dearest ! Come, that we may spend life together—that life may hold for us the fulfilment of our love ! You will, my darling ? "

Across the deep-set, greenish-grey, suffering eyes there passed a sheen as of inward, hidden tears. She did not answer at once, but turned and moved noiselessly towards the chattering, busy Babs. Then slowly, tonelessly, in dull finality, came the reply :

"Our love is dead."

IX

THE night was close and hot, and sitting on the side of the bed wherein Babs lay sleeping, Margery took count of the passing of the hours by the chiming of the old-fashioned clock fixed against the wall above the mantel-shelf in the dining-room.

Midnight had brought the brazen clang of the dozen sonorous strokes, sounding startlingly loud through the tense silence that held within its hush the precincts of the post-house; yet Margery, save that she had loosened from its coils the dark hair which fell heavily over her bent shoulders and arms, was still in her ordinary dress, and the hands lying loosely one in the other upon the black skirts gleamed white through the masses of hair falling over them, stirring gently as though alive and in sympathy with the restless, impatient sigh and movement that occasionally broke from her. Midnight had gone by—to that fact she was acutely alive, since at daybreak Woodward had said his journey was to begin, and to wait up in order to catch the last faint sounds of his retreating steps had been her intention.

But now a terrible restlessness stole over her, increasing in strength as the minutes passed by, until she found herself viewing with a sense of horror the possibility of carrying out her former intention. She must go somewhere—anywhere—she told herself, so that those sounds—which to her would represent the lowering of the coffin of their love into its final resting-place—should not reach her ears. No longer had she the strength or courage left for so dread an ordeal. She must spare herself this last

bitter pang, or surely reason and sanity would pass from her . . . the human brain could bear but so much and no more . . . then came the limit.

She looked through the unshuttered window into the still, languorous night. A strip of moonshine fell across the dark of the room; the moon, she knew, was waning, and the night would grow darker still before the grey light of earliest dawn.

Suddenly, as though resolved in her mind, Margery rose and moved to the door, through which she passed, closing it noiselessly behind her. A few seconds later she stood by her brother's grave. Some indefinable instinct had brought her to that spot.

She turned to George, as in the past, for help in her dark, restless mood of fresh, unbearable suffering. Only thus—within reach of all that was left of him—could she find the needed strength to endure with quiet courage this final, bitter renunciation.

She bent over the dark mound of earth; the sickly-sweet perfume of the fading clematis and roses heaped on the grave was wafted insistently on the warm night-air. "Can you hear me?" she whispered, faintly. "I am so lonely—so lonely—George. I have come to you for companionship, for comfort in my awful loneliness . . . we always were good pals . . . weren't we?"

"I am going mad for want of human sympathy," she wept, "and *his* love has to go with the rest . . . with all life held for me . . . it is my life that is passing with yours . . . and now with his . . . he is going out of my life with the dawn . . ."

The shadows of the tall, quivering poplars and gracefully-swaying syringas—from whose leafy branches sounded no longer twitter or pipe of bird—fell black and clearly-defined across the grave, save where a filtering of moonshine silvered the white roses scattered upon its heaped surface. Margery, sitting against the side of that raised mound—between the ridges of earth that held both mother and brother—felt less forlorn, more able to dwell

composedly upon the approaching departure of the man she loved, than when out of sight and touch of this strip of earth holding within its restful embrace those dearest to her. Her brother—bound to her by that passionate, unreasoning devotion of her earliest life—still lived in the sacred, hidden shrine within her deepest and most enduring consciousness. Never, in that abiding-place set apart to him, could his place be taken by another, even though the future years should bring in their inevitable train those new interests and new relationships which the iron hand of Time forces upon us all.

But Woodward, too, had his own special share of her heart and strong, passionate affection, deadened though that passion was for the moment by the blow of her brother's death. It would, she knew, stir again when time had worked its will upon her, and in that hour she would feel the extent of her loss. He had come into her life—a reserved, matured man—and by the influences which draw together the man to the woman they had found in each other the desired mateship—the promise of a perfect physical, intellectual and spiritual union. She had inspired within him a true conception of the powers within his own being—the powers of sacrifice, devotion, passion, tenderness, which in man is called forth by woman. He had awakened within her the need for the mate who could satisfy her widely-sympathetic nature, her big-heartedness, her intensity of feeling; who alone could complete and round her life, blighted on the threshold of womanhood by a tragic fate. She recalled that time of stress and terror long buried out of sight. Ruthlessly she dug it up, dragging it forth from its swaddling-bands in the musty tomb, long closed to the light of her searching eyes. This, it was, that now raised the irrevocable barrier between Woodward and herself. Did the consequences of one's past ever dog one's steps through life? she asked herself, angrily. How the world had reeled and life had gone black before her eyes on the day when she had learned the ghastly truth that the man—whom in the

immaturity of girlhood she had in wilful, headstrong fashion elected to marry without asking sanction of parents or relatives—had committed a crime against her! Even now, in the marvellous stillness and dark of the African night in the hour awaiting the dawn, she could see the tigerish glare in the eyes of the woman who claimed him as husband on the deck of the out-going passenger steamer . . . she could see the startled, frightened look in the blue eyes of the man . . . could hear her own voice asking frantically, as she clung to his arm: "It's a lie . . . a lie? . . . say it's a lie! . . ." She could recall her terror and fear—the wave of madness that swept over her brain—when she awoke from the long stupor into which the shock had thrown her and felt the rushing of the green waters of Table Bay Docks beneath the port-hole of the cabin taken for herself and for him, and heard the swish of the keel of the ocean liner which was carrying her alone on the start of that homeward journey they were to have taken together—an unmarried girl . . . with the life-to-be already stirring within her vigorous, youthful frame . . .

Then had followed those dreary, awful days of waiting—uncomforted and alone: days when she had cursed the light of the sun, and the warm feel of mother-earth, and the perfume of the familiar grasses and flowering scrub, and the song of birds, and the voices of her fellows; nights when she had crouched in the dark, striving to hide herself from herself, from her inmost consciousness, and had felt frenzy beckoning her to self-destruction . . . She stirred, and laid her hand palm-downward upon the mould of the soft red earth covering the quiet grave. Yes, it had been George who had come at the end of those days, sent by his parents to meet her at their nearest sea-port town. It was on George's faithful breast, within his comforting clasp, that she had bent her aching head, while burning tears—forced from the depths of the wilful heart now brought low in the dust and ashes of repentance—had choked her utterance of the sordid tale of folly and guile which had ended in the humiliating situation in

which she now found herself. It was George's voice—gentle and comforting and inexpressibly dear—which had soothed her agony of mind, and it was his good judgment and resourcefulness in summoning the mother to the daughter's aid that had shielded from the world's eager, loud-mouthed condemnation her pitiful position. Should she ever forget all he had been to her then and since? She touched the grave re-assuringly.

George had helped her to preserve her secret, and she would hold it to the end. The counsel she would have asked of him in regard to Woodward could never now find voice. The counsel he would have given her at this crisis in her life lay buried with him in the grave. She looked down, whispering: "Hold me from speaking till he shall have gone out of my life."

Over in the east, the last flicker of the dropping moon threw a thin, magic radiance athwart the grey of the oncoming dawn. Up on the mountain-side the silence was intense. Hushed in the sleep of night, mother-earth, the plain and hills, with their crown of herbage, stretched motionless as though under the spell of death. Margery got to her feet, and drew over her dark hair the long black scarf that had slipped from her shoulders; then stood, with unseeing eyes fixed on the dark mountain-peak overshadowing The Outspan. There it was she had parted from George and tasted of the depth of suffering! There it was that she had met with Woodward and had tasted of the height of joy! From that mountain-top her brother had ridden to the fate awaiting him. His life had been sacrificed on the altar of patriotism. The very word brought to her recollection the personality of that brother-soldier, whose life equally was to fall a sacrifice to his patriotism. He had understood George's point of view as one brave man understands another's . . . he had turned aside to help Thane in that hour of deepest need . . . and the dawn was coming, and with the rising of the sun his day of life must end.

"I'll climb the hill and take a last farewell of him,

instead," Margery suddenly decided. "We owe it to him, for he was kind to us," and with a last tender look at the flower-decked grave she turned and moved through the dim light. Reaching the foot-bridge, she crossed it, so absorbed by the thought that she was turning her back upon her sole remaining chance of catching a last sight of the man whose love she was renouncing that she failed to notice the dark shadow reaching from out the patch of tall bulrushes fringing the bank of the stream. Silently Woodward watched her bent form, as slowly she climbed the rise, ere he attempted to move upward himself, following cautiously and at a discreet distance. "I cannot allow her to go alone . . . it would not be right," he told himself peremptorily, pushing aside the thought of his early start.

Now she was passing within hail of the Top Farm homestead, and her voice came floating down through the obscurity of night to his ears :

"Jo! . . . is it you, Jo?"

"Oh, Margery, misery will not let me lie in my bed in peace."

"But, Jo, this is wrong . . . to go wandering about all night will surely harm you."

He caught Johanna's bitter laugh. "Isn't it Aletta who has got to be careful of her health?" she asked ironically, then broke into a wail :

"Margery! Margery! Oh, when will Thane see me? Is he made of iron? Has he a heart at all?" she questioned fiercely, and Margery's reply came, not untenderly :

"You must be patient, Jo."

"Patient!" sounded the sharp echo to the words.

"How long—O Lord, how long?"

"Thane isn't responsible for his actions just now, dear; in time the thought of you, and the sense of what he owes you, will, no doubt, come back to him. But, as you know, he is not at home now."

"But you know where he is?—you know how he is?" Jo asked sharply, and Margery's voice returned a brief negative.

"Is it true, then, as they told me, that when he came to his senses and was able to leave his bed he went off on Buller, no one knows where?" Jo demanded again, in quick eagerness.

"It is true, Jo. I begged of him to wait and get stronger—he was so fearfully weak—weak as a baby after those awful days of delirium." Margery's voice slid into silence and Jo cried out:

"You did not let him go alone?"

"No," the other replied, after a pause. "No; we sent a boy on horseback to follow him and keep him in sight as far as possible. We've heard since they went across the veldt, heading Swaziland way . . . God knows when he will return . . ."

"—if ever!" cried the other. "And even if he lives and comes out of his madness, will he then remember and turn to poor Jo?"

"Give him time, Jo . . . he is mad with grief."

"Oh, this cursed, cruel war! It has raised the bar for years and years to come between your people and mine! Forgive me, Margery . . . I know what it has cost you . . . but you never speak . . . you are so silent . . . like a ghost you move on your ways, the while your big heart is breaking with grief . . . yet you say nothing . . . only listen to my babble of woe."

"Thank God that you are able to babble; while we have left us a grain of hope we can babble; but, Jo, death is the one irreparable misfortune! In all other sorrows we can babble and find ease . . . but death offers no such consolation . . . it takes our loved ones and they are gone . . . *the rest is silence.*"

Now they had reached the opening in the bush-path, and emerged on the clearing leading across the level table-land of the mountain-top with its irregular-shaped boulders, piled rock upon rock, intersecting the flat, scrub-covered surface. At the foot of the highest of these strange cairns of rock-fragments—heaped together, doubtless, by some huge convulsion of primeval ages—the girls paused.

"I will rest here," sighed Jo, wriggling into a soft patch of waving grasses sheltered by a projecting slab of rock ; "you get to the top, since you want to watch."

"Our widest view is from the top of this heap," replied Margery, as she took off her long wrap and spread it over the girl's shoulders, tucking it in before and behind ; then added :

"Try and sleep, Jo, if only for ten minutes ; it will do you good."

"Sleep ! Ach ! those two will sleep soundly enough, presently ! Can't I feel for them because I'm a Boer girl ? Yes, truly, but the hot blood in my veins makes me comprehend and pity."

Margery turned and scrambled to the height.

Standing on the topmost boulder—her thin skirts outlining her tall slenderness, her loosened hair floating below her waist, the darkness of her deep-set eyes sharply contrasted by the pallor of her stern-browed, suffering face—she appeared to Woodward as the Spirit of Justice sprung forth upon the dawn of the newly-created day to voice a silent protest against the world of men. To Margery herself, as her eyes swept around the points of the compass—widened now by reason of the oncoming of the dawn—the spectacle of Woodward standing in the opening of the bush-path appeared but as an illusion called up from the recesses of her over-wrought brain. She looked again, and more intently, at the small figure by his side, wrapped in the cumbersome woollen shawl which covered head and face. Only the wide, jewel-bright eyes—penetrating and alluring as her own—stared pathetically from the dark wrapper so closely enfolding the childish face.

Margery looked frowningly down upon the two ; the two looked inquiringly—imploringly—up at her ; then, in response to the slight nod of assent, moved eagerly forward and upward.

"Don't be angry, Margery," Babs pleaded, breathlessly, as, helped by Woodward, she scrambled from rock to rock, finally throwing herself upon that motionless figure. "I

woke and missed you ; then I got so frightened and couldn't sleep a wink . . . then I slipped on my overall and this big shawl—it's ever so warm, Margey dear—and when I ran down the garden looking for you, I saw Phil on the bridge."

Margery turned grave eyes on Woodward, but Babs interposed hastily :

" Oh, he didn't see *me*, or, of course, he'd have sent me back to bed ; I knew that much," Babs added with a triumphant air, " so I crept softly after him until we were more than half-way up the bush-path ; then I was so tired I called out to him, and he carried me to the top. And, oh, I am tired . . ." she added, sitting flat upon the boulder and stretching to their full length her slender brown legs.

" But, Babs, you must never again follow me in this naughty fashion. How did you know I was up here ? I might have been anywhere else ? "

" Well," Babs answered, wisely, " I knew you must be up here, or why should Phil have been coming all this long way so early if it wasn't to say good-bye to you before he goes ? " She looked up affectionately into Woodward's face. " But you won't go now, will you ? . . . You'll stay another day with us, won't you ? " she pleaded.

" If Margery will let me."

His voice, firm and low—breathed through the still air of that lonely height, hanging, as it seemed, between heaven and earth—carried in its tones something of that frankness, sincerity and directness which to the dwellers on these vast spaces of solitude is inseparable from the veldt-world itself. With crystal clearness the veldt—open, and simple and direct—teaches to her children the lessons of guilelessness and sincerity ; and men and women living close to her bosom suddenly find themselves speaking their hearts out, or listening to the voices of their fellows when reserve is laid aside and truth alone speaks. Woodward's quiet sincerity of tone awoke within the woman's mind an intense longing for full confession, an intense desire to return truth by truth ; to speak before

he passed out of her life all that lay deeply hidden within her heart. She was possessed by the conviction that could she but lay aside her reserve and confess to that burden of sin, suffering, passion, devotion, struggle—these would become to him, as to her, the eternal verities of which the veldt-world around spoke in simple eloquence.

"Oh, darling, you will!" pleaded Babs, creeping into her arms and pressing her rosy lips to Margery's pale cheek ere she snuggled down within the comforting clasp. "And, oh"—with a deep yawn—"I'm just drea'fully sleepy and tired."

Margery, with down-bent looks, arranged the shawl more closely about the child.

"Let us sit down," suggested Woodward in practical fashion. Then noting that her gaze wandered in the direction of the camp of the Irregulars, "There is nothing to expect before sunrise . . . and that won't be for another hour," he reminded her.

She crouched down on the spot he indicated, which formed a natural seat with an oblong-shaped boulder against which to rest her back. Babs, sunk deeply within the black skirts, with Margery's arms closed about the shawl which covered her, slept easily. Woodward, looking down upon them, saw the hot tears drop from the woman's eyes. Like crystal drops they sank into the folds of the shawl.

He stooped to the level of the face. "Margery, it is awful to see you suffer, and stand helplessly by . . . let me help you . . . let me, Margery! You are too brave and sympathetic and true-hearted to refuse to let me help you . . . to ease my misery . . ."

She drew her hand across her eyes; her lids drooped and covered them as she replied, dully:

"No one can help me . . . Death is the irrevocable evil."

"But love, dearest—warm, living love and sympathy and companionship—don't these help? Would you deny yourself these? Would you deny me my right to the love you have for me?"

She drew herself together . . . she would not listen to that plea, echoed and endorsed though it was by her own clamorous heart. The child stood between them, she reminded herself, doggedly. Her past stood between them. Her voice when it came sounded cold.

"Why did you not go? I thought we had said our farewell."

"I shall never leave you, dear."

"But your home and people."

"Your home and people are mine," he said, tenderly.

"You are mine and the child is mine . . . Won't you have it so?"

She shook her head, but suffered the hand that lay upon the shawl to remain covered by his own. And now the hot tears fell upon that strong, sun-browned hand, while the voice he loved urged him to leave her to tread alone the destined path of the future.

He spoke in reply that he had cast in his lot with hers.

After that they sat in silent, grateful understanding of that mutual love so precious alike to the man as to the woman. What lay before them they did not care to consider. Sufficient it was to both Woodward and Margery in this moment of precious spiritual communion that the soul of passion and strength which embraced and animated and moved through their mutual love was there within the hearts of either—felt in fullest measure by the one as the other. Though parting lay in store for them, this realization of their spiritual union would help them to live their lives in life's truest, highest sense. No longer would Margery, attending to her daily round of monotonous home-duties, feel an utterly lonely soul; while from Woodward could never be taken the knowledge that a big-hearted woman held him nearest to her faithful soul. They spoke no words as they sat together on the mountain-top in the hour before sunrise, for they needed not the language of love as expressed in words, since love spoke silently from one to the other as the dawn brightened over them in the east.

CONCLUSION

"Be it granted me to behold you in dying,
Hills of home! And to hear again the call;
Hear about the graves of the *heroes* the pee-wees crying—
And hear no more at all."

THE DAWN brightened over the silent spaces of the illimitable veldt. It came as a mighty conqueror, driving the darkness before its sweeping advance from off the face of the red-brown plains. It drew the dun-hued veil from the skies, and cleared the white-wreathed mists from low-lying slopes and valleys. A million folded buds, on scrub and bush and low bulbous growth, opened glad eyes beneath the ardent kiss of returning day. High above plain and valley, and bush and scrub, stretched the vast heavens—now pearly-grey and paley-blue—looking down upon the glories of the awakening earth; while patches of flame-coloured banners, bars of glowing crimson and azure and purple and gold, streaked the eastern horizon, heralding in the language of Creation's earliest morning the advent of the king of day.

The sight brought Margery and Woodward to their feet. Hand in hand they strained their eyes southward—past those living glories proclaiming fresh birth, renewed energies, fresh calling into being of the Earth-world—towards the furthestmost limit of human vision where stood the several *dorps* and the military camps—mere specks on the distant horizon. Beneath them lay mile upon mile of virgin waste stretching toward the distant mountain ranges whose peaks faded in the immeasurable

distance. Above, was the unflecked blue of the tent of the firmament—equally vast, equally spacious and far reaching. As they stood together on that topmost peak suspended between heaven and earth, solitude and magnitude—immense, immeasurable—surrounding them, there was brought insistently to their awed, exalted senses a realization of man's littleness, of the Creator's greatness.

"Oh, what *gnats* men are!" Margery breathed aloud; "and yet they can do *that*!" she fell on her knees, one hand still supporting the sleeping child, the other stretched out before her. "*More lives! . . . more sufferers!*" she sobbed, shudderingly . . . Then the sense of the imminence of the tragic drama, carried out to its grim finality on that opposite point of furthest vision, broke her down in body and spirit. Following upon her own crushing, personal grief this vivid sense of the sufferings of others broke down her obdurate will, forced from her stubborn heart an acknowledgment of the truth. She who comprehended sorrow so well was overwhelmed by the thought of the bitter cup offered to the lips of her fellows. Her hardness of resolve melted, her reserve was beaten down, her soul was brought to confession. "She is mine, Phil . . . and I owed it to you to have told you sooner," she said, quietly; then felt the comforting pressure of his touch and knew herself the dearer to him for the voluntary avowal.

He, too, knelt with bowed head. For now a shaft of golden light—striking directly upward and breaking into a million points of scintillating flame—announced that sunrise was with them. A hush fell upon their spirits as the Lord of Day sprang from his couch, spreading his beams alike upon the living as upon the dead. From Mother-Earth came the voice of a terrible grief—a voice of woman's groans, and tears, and sighs, and wails; Johanna, awake and weeping, typified the grief and sorrow of all womanhood throughout the sister-Continents. The voice of this lamentable and exceedingly bitter cry arose from earth's daughters; from women, the bearers of men

—thus ruthlessly sacrificed, upon the altar of the god of War; from the scarred, suffering face of the veldt itself, drinking in afresh the blood of her sons. And with this loud and bitter cry ringing out on the silence of the peaceful morning, with this voice as of the groaning and travailing in pain of the world of Creation, the watchers on the mountain-top turned to the rising sun, lifting their hearts in supplication to Him who hides behind the veil seeming to withdraw Himself from our sorrows and miseries.

Yet they knew that their petitions were heard and with hearts humbled and comforted, hand in hand, Margery and Woodward knelt, the child between them.

THE END

NOTE.—The history of the Brandon family to the conclusion of the war is narrated in the novel entitled

“BOOK OF THANE BRANDON.”

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